

Birth of The San Diego Post-Doctoral Organization (SDPO)

Hady Felfly (University of California San Diego)

Abstract

Postdocs are a major contributor to advancements in research, and postdoctoral training is a Curriculum Vitae building experience during which postdocs must establish various connections and collaborations that will help them build their career. They also need advice, as well as help in integrating in their surroundings. To better assist postdocs in their journey, the Postdoctoral Association (PDA) at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) created a postdoc network that encompasses multiple PDAs of local institutions, called San Diego Postdoc Network/Organization (SDPO). Since then, the SDPO members have had numerous inter-institutional exchange of events and ideas, as well as sharing various resources related to postdocs.

Key words:

Postdocs, PDAs, Networks, Sharing.

The postdoctoral training is a very important phase of the development of a Ph.D. after graduation. This is a Curriculum Vitae (CV) building training period where more experience is acquired and the candidate is prepared for a higher employment status. Therefore, adequate planning is very important for the success of a postdoc.

Challenges facing postdocs

Although it seems straightforward, postdoctoral training is quite challenging for most candidates, in particular, for international postdocs, who constitute the majority of postdocs, with over 65% being foreigners. All postdocs face difficulties such as finding the right place that best fits their need, proper planning of their training, exchange of ideas with other postdocs, and collecting enough achievements that can enhance their CV. In addition to that, international postdocs face more issues, such as building proper network with other postdocs in a place they just arrived into, handling their immigration and visa status, finding needed resources in their respective institutions, among others.

While postdocs tend to interact with their peers, the load of work required at this stage poses much pressure that often postdocs do not have enough time to even get to know most people at their institution, not to say at other institutions. Furthermore, postdocs are often in a position where they almost solely depend on their supervisor for advancing their career, and, when their supervisor is very busy, which is often the case, postdocs do not have much options for growing.

Postdoctoral Associations (PDAs)

To solve these issues and to create an engaging life for postdocs where they can interact with each other outside the context of research, many institutions around the nation have created Postdoctoral Associations (PDAs), which are a body of postdocs in charge of advocacy, networking, and career development. PDAs organize seminars for topics relevant for postdocs, social events where postdocs can meet and establish personal contacts and expand their personal network, as well as assisting postdocs in the planning of their career, giving them advice, and putting them in contact with experts who can point them in the right direction.

PDAs of a particular institution organize events that are usually limited to postdocs from that institutions. They invite outside speakers, but again, the audience is made up almost entirely of individuals from within the institutions. On the one hand, that shows a dedication from the part of the PDA to serve its postdocs, and on the other hand, the social and scientific reach of postdocs remain limited to one particular institution. However, for a postdoc, career building relies on getting to know people from multiple institutions.

Postdoctoral Scholars affairs Offices (PDOs)

To assist postdocs, many institutions have created an office for postdoctoral scholar's affairs, which handles the increasingly demanding training period of postdocs. These offices provide regular orientation sessions for new postdocs, explaining to them relevant matters from the various services available at their institutions, to the health benefits, and their immigration requirements. In addition, personnel are available at these offices to help postdocs with advocacy and other matters along the way. These offices, also called Postdoctoral Offices or PDOs, organize regular seminars relevant for postdocs, such

as grant writing, transition from academia to industry, teaching training, and others.

However, while PDOs can guide postdocs at academic level, there is still much needed. Postdocs need to be able to have non formal discussions about their projects with their peers, they need to exchange ideas, bring new collaborators, and get to know other scientists in their fields and other fields and establish permanent mutually beneficial contacts with them, as well as build a social network for themselves, a network they will need along the way for advancing their careers.

The Creation of the San Diego Postdoctoral Organization/Network

The Fall 2008 started with a one-of-its-kind meeting that resulted in the creation of a new body for postdocs at San Diego: the San Diego Post-Doctoral Organization (SDPO), a Postdoctoral Network.

From what is described above, and with the increasing number of postdocs in various research enterprises, inter-institutional communication became a necessity for better career development. The University of California San Diego (UCSD) Post-Doctoral Association (PDA) sensed this need and took the lead for broadening the postdoctoral networks at San Diego.

After PDA-to-PDA contacts, UCSD received a positive signal from local research institutes for a city-wide meeting, and set the date of September 11 as the gathering time for six of San Diego PDAs. Headed by the UCSD PDA represented by Fabian Filipp (Ph.D., then Chair) and Hady Felfly (Ph.D., then Vice Chair External Relations and Finances), representatives of the local PDAs convened at the Burnham Institute for Medical Research.

Six institutions were represented in the meeting: The University of California San Diego (UCSD), The Scripps Research Institute (TSRI), the Sanford/Burnham Institute of Biomedical Research, The Salk Institute, La Jolla Institute of Allergy and Immunology (LIAI), and SKCC. Eleven representatives were at the meeting. That included, in addition to the UCSD representatives: Peter Haberk, Ph.D. (TSRI Society of Fellows), Erin Dunn (Ph.D.), Jose Morachis (Ph.D.) and Will Alaynick (Ph.D.) (The Salk Research Institute, Salk Research Fellows), Martin Denzel, Ph.D. student (Burnham Institute for Medical Research), Stefan Grottegut (Ph.D.) and Michel Hicky (Ph.D.) (SKCC, SSN), Sonia Feau (Ph.D.) and Florence Lambomez (LIAI, LPA).

The members exchanged information and ideas about needs of each PDA, networking possibilities, fundraising and collaboration, as well as event sharing, which will both increase contacts between postdocs and reduce the weight of planning by common contributions. Jose Morachis from Salk introduced the MySDScience as a means for web communications and a group for the SDPO was created under the name of San Diego Post-Doctoral Network, counting now 41 members, where events and ideas, job offers, and others activities from all participating PDAs can be posted and easily accessed by everybody. This website can be accessed at: <http://www.mysdscience.com/group/sandiegopostdocnetwork>

MySDScience provides an easy two-minute process to create an interactive webpage, where information can be readily shared, including announcements for conferences and other activities, as well as job postings.

The PostDoctoral Network members have been working since then on planning events together, and offering academic inter-institutional assistance. For example, the TSRI and Sanford/Burnham have each organized major social networking events at Christmas and Halloween where postdocs from all institutions joined; UCSD has organized seminars that were of interests for postdocs from other institutions, as well as the National Postdoc Appreciation Day in 2009 that was attended by postdocs from virtually all neighboring institutions. In addition, these institutions collaborate heavily in the scientific fields; for example, seminar series organized by the Sanford/Burnham, Salk and TSRI are advertised on a broad network of mailing lists reaching all institutions so that everyone can attend.

All postdocs are welcome to join, and SDPO is expected to evolve into a broader network in the future.