

Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience at UW-Madison  
UW-Madison Graduate School  
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## Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience at UW-Madison

### Executive Summary

Concern about postdoctoral scholars prompted the UW Madison Graduate School to convene a committee in fall of 2000 to examine issues related to the postdoctoral experience on this campus and to make recommendations for any needed improvements. The committee developed a survey in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, which interviewed approximately 500 postdoctoral scholars in late fall of 2001. The results were overwhelmingly positive:

- Almost 90% of the postdoctoral scholars reporting they are satisfied with their experience at UW-Madison
- More than 90% saying they would take a postdoctoral position here again.

However, there were concerns regarding:

- Only 35% are satisfied with the amount they are paid
- Approximately 50% are uncertain about conditions of employment

A large majority were

- Job-skills training, (86%)
- Process of finding a job (96%)
- Writing grant proposals (78%)
- Effective teaching methods

Therefore, the Graduate School has created, and will continue to modify as appropriate, a postdoctoral infrastructure that includes:

- A postdoctoral scholars Web page to provide information about conditions of employment, training opportunities and career development
- Training opportunities through Graduate School Seminars and Human Resources Programs
- Better information to departments about policies and procedures changes.

Both scholars and departments can use this infrastructure to enhance both the postdoctoral experience and the research community. While the findings of the Graduate School's survey confirmed that UW-Madison was meeting the charge of providing a fulfilling experience for postdoctoral scholars on this campus, an improved infrastructure coupled with departmental efforts will enhance the experience.

## Introduction

Postdoctoral scholars have received national attention recently due largely to the increased production of Ph.Ds in the 1980s. National associations, recognizing the influx of new talent into the market, began to study the status and needs of postdoctoral scholars. Calls for major changes in the training of postdoctoral scholars began in 1997 with the Commission on Professionals in Science and Technology (CPST) report *Career Prospects: A Status Report*. This was followed by the 1998 American Association of Universities (AAU) report, *Committee on Postdoctoral Education Report and Recommendations*, and most recently the 2000 Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (COSEPUP) report, *Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience for Scientists and Engineers*. These reports recommended establishing policies and procedures for incorporating postdoctoral education into university academic programs. They also called for:

- standard definition of postdoctoral appointments
- guidelines for recruitment and appointment
- periodic evaluations
- career advising and job placement
- establishing a central office to monitor postdoctoral core policies

The areas of concern highlighted by the national studies, coupled with the valuable role postdoctoral scholars play in advancing research on this campus, prompted the UW-Madison Graduate School to convene a committee in fall of 2000 to examine issues related to the postdoctoral experience on this campus. This committee was charged with identifying areas of strength and weakness on the UW-Madison campus and developing a plan to respond in areas that needed improvement.

UW-Madison has approximately 600 postdoctoral scholars in schools, colleges, centers and institutes throughout the University. Postdoctoral scholars on the UW-Madison campus hold the personnel titles of either Postdoctoral Fellows, Research Associates or Postdoctoral Trainees. They are appointed primarily for the pursuit of advanced study or research and are, therefore, categorized as "employees-in-training." Of those who responded to the survey 62% identified themselves as Research Associates, 22% as Postdoctoral Fellows, and the remaining were unclear. The majority of postdoctoral scholars (75%) are in the biological sciences; nearly 20% are in the physical sciences, with social sciences and humanities making up the balance. Approximately two-thirds of postdoctoral scholars are men (68%), one-third are women (32%) and slightly more than half (53%) non-U.S. citizens.

The committee, informed by the results and recommendations of the national surveys, began by conducting listening groups of postdoctoral scholars, principal investigators, and faculty mentors during the spring of 2001. Informal e-mail surveys followed. Both the listening groups and the e-mail surveys identified issues of:

- Access to timely employment information
- Recruitment protocol
- Professional career development
- Workplace protection
- Leave policies
- Postdoctoral scholars Web page

### **Postdoctoral Survey**

\_\_\_\_\_The culmination of the committee's work was a postdoctoral survey developed by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center and administered in late August and early September, 2001, URL