Faculty Resistance to Reform: Challenges to changing postdoc benefits at University of Maryland

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Abstract

On Wednesday, April 8, 2015, the blog post "Eroding Benefits for UMD postdocs?" caused quite a stir (Benderley, 2015). Such a stir, in fact, that the post was soon taken down, and revised (you can read both the original and revised posts at the link above). The blog pointed to an article in The Diamondback (Dunn, 2015), discussing changes to benefits for postdocs at the University of Maryland, College Park. The articles caused something of a storm over social media (Collins, 2015), not least because of a fair amount of confusion generated over what is actually happening. However, what is really noteworthy is a letter, signed by 131 tenured and tenure-track professors in life sciences at UMD, principally Iqbal Hamza and Norma Andrews, and supported by Jonathan Dinman, Chair of the Cell Biology and Molecular Genetics Department, which opposes the administration's proposed changes because they will "raise the cost of support of postdocs, adversely affecting research productivity and competitiveness at the University of Maryland." After receiving clarification on the matter from Mark Arnold, Director of Faculty Initiatives at the Office of Faculty Affairs at UMD College Park, I'm going to try to explain what the changes actually are, and provide some commentary on the faculty letter.

the WINNOWER

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

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WRITE A REVIEW

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WHAT IS THE CURRENT SITUATION?

UMD College Park has, since the late 80's, been appointing postdocs as faculty. The appointments, as "research associates" (of which there are currently around 600), fell under two categories, "Category 15" and "Category 25".

"Cat-15" appointments, a benefits eligible category used predominantly for research faculty, came with full benefits: retirement contributions, health insurance and tuition remission, inclusive of spouses and children.

However, there was an exception to this rule – the "Cat-25" appointments. These appointments did not have a standard complement of benefits – the Principal Investigator of the hiring lab determined these benefits. About 180 Cat-25 employees, around 60 of which are "postdocs" and 120 "research assistants" (to approximate to how those terms are used generally elsewhere) will be affected by a proposed change in the use of Cat-25.

WHAT ARE THE PROPOSED CHANGES?

Under a general revamping of the whole system, the inconsistencies in benefits being distributed to postdocs was viewed by the university administration as unhelpful in terms of human resources practice and with increasing federal scrutiny of sponsored institutions. Therefore, one year ago the administration announced that as of the end of the 2015 financial year, Cat-25 would cease to exist. All full-time faculty would then get the full benefits package. The university was given the fiscal year to

make preparations for the changes, and the 60-or-so postdocs would be brought up to the same level of everyone else.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The problem, identified by those primarily using state and federal grants such as those from the NIH and NSF (particularly faculty from the life sciences, but also including agricultural studies) was that certain benefits such as the tuition remission could not be funded from grants. Acknowledging this, the administration carried out negotiations which settled on removing this aspect of the benefits program, due to the unpredictable nature and large sums involved, should the situation of a postdoc with a spouse or child studying at UMD arise. This benefit is actually not available to even tenure track faculty for the first two years of employment either.

However, retirement contributions, which can be funded from grants, were non-negotiable for the administration. Whilst postdocs could make voluntary contributions, the general observation was that a) postdocs don't earn enough as it is to make such contributions and b) the time that someone is a postdoc is a crucial period, both in terms of duration and the time of life of the position, in saving for retirement (see the Department of Labor on the need to start saving early).

Therefore, the administration proposed a new system for postdoc hires: a "postdoctoral scholar", limited to three years, would get retirement and health benefits like all other full-time employees, but no tuition remission. After three years, they can be promoted to "postdoctoral associate", for a further three years: at this point they are now eligible for tuition remission benefits. After a total of 6 years as a postdoc, they either leave or may be eligible for appointment into an appropriate faculty position, the goal being to avoid the "postdoc-for-life" scenario.

Note: "postdoctoral fellows", who are those postdocs on fellowship funding rather than being funded from research grants, are treated as "trainees" and not "employees", and are not eligible for the benefits in this system. I will not go further to address this here other than to state that there are ways around this that some institutions have found, but it requires a lot of reworking from human resources departments.

So, in summary, the institutional approach by the administration at UMD College Park has been to treat postdocs as faculty, which is a progressive model.

WHO DOES THIS AFFECT?

As it currently stands, 85% of "postdocs" at UMD College Park are Cat-15: they get full benefits. Only 15% are therefore going to be subject to the majority of this change. But it is where the majority of this 15% are based that makes the difference: the life sciences. Courtesy of Andrew Dunn at University of Maryland, I present the letter written by the UMD life sciences faculty (Supplementary File). This document provides a striking example of the current problem facing advocates of change, and the publishers of recommendations for reform: whilst there may be many who talk of change, transforming this into action will not only be difficult; it will be resisted.

WHAT THE LETTER REVEALS ABOUT ATTITUDES TO REFORM

Although the letter does propose the creation of a Postdoctoral Office, which would benefit postdocs in areas such as career development, the general tone of the letter is that postdocs should be less well compensated in the interest of institutional research productivity. Below are some specific quotes and commentary to refute this claim and demonstrate how this attitude is a part of the more systemic problems in biomedical research.

"The use of Cat-15 will raise the cost of support of postdocs, adversely affecting research productivity and competitiveness at the University of Maryland."

Despite 131 academics signing this letter, they provide no supporting evidence for this statement. On

the contrary, books have been written (e.g. Nelson, 2012) about how treating employees better leads to increased productivity. In terms of competitiveness, the authors mean the competitiveness of the university for grant funding, not for postdocs: the idea that postdocs would be more likely to apply for a position at an institution that treats them better than others is not considered.

Postdocs are not "contractual non-tenured faculty", the document claims, but "temporary trainees". The crux of the problem is highlighted in the discussion of the Cat-15 positions:

"Cat-15 positions do not address the special circumstances of postdocs as temporary trainees, and requires benefits not covered by funding agencies such as NIH and not provided by competitive institutions."

The authors do not lay out what the "special circumstances" are that are not being addressed by these positions providing retirement and health benefits to postdocs, and so it is unclear what would be preferable. In addition, health insurance and retirement contributions *can* be covered by grants (the tuition remission remains a more complex but, also, seemingly rare scenario). However, they are correct that these benefits are often "not provided by competitive institutions". This repeats the assertion that treating postdocs better than most institutions is not a strategy to remain competitive, further highlighted by the apparently contradictory statement:

"The research funding erosion described above will prevent us from hiring the most talented postdocs, the real engines of competitive research, because we will be unable to pay them competitive salaries."

In an argument on inequality generated by these proposals, the authors suggest that:

"The appointment of postdocs supported from research grants is unfair for individuals that successfully compete for national postdoctoral fellowships."

The argument here surely would be to advocate bringing those postdocs on fellowships up to the level of those on research grants, not to bring everyone else down. Again, there are ways around this, if institutions are willing to make the changes necessary to clear the administrative hurdles.

Section (3) of the "Background" section introduces the "death spiral":

"fewer people translate into reduced output, publications in lower-impact journals, a sharper decline in productivity and competitiveness, and eventually, failure to renew funding."

No study is cited that fewer people results in reduced output. In fact, a Datahound blog post looking at publication outputs as a function of the number of R01s shows a complex non-linear relationship between size and output. This is further supported by data showing that simply adding more postdocs is not the only way to structure a productive lab, and it could be argued that for "higher-impact" publications, more graduate students would be preferable to more postdocs (Conti and Liu, 2015; Pain, 2015). The assertion that small labs publish only in low-impact journals (itself a metric worthy of further discussion) is without supporting evidence. The authors state that the "death spiral" then ensues, although they do not cite examples of where this has happened, leading to the conclusion that this is speculative rather than evidence-based.

Benefits may "easily escalate to over 40% of gross salary" (40% of$42840 (NIH, 2014) is $17136 – this includes the expensive, but arguably unlikely scenario, of covering tuition remission) and "members of a peer review grant panel will not view excessive and uncommon postdoctoral fringe benefit practices favorably". The use of the word "excessive" is, unfortunately, likely to be an accurate reflection of systemic attitudes in study sections and peer review panels. That health benefits and retirement contributions, benefits readily made available in many fields of employment for peers of the same age and qualification level, are viewed as "excessive" by the biomedical research community, is an attitude that surely must be changed. An early career researcher's dedication to science is by no means diminished by the desire to be paid a living wage for doing so, and attitudes to the contrary are

one of the greatest challenges in achieving reform of the system.

EVER MORE POSTDOCS

"To become competitive in the life sciences and reach productivity levels comparable to our aspirational peers, our campus needs more postdoctoral scholars – not fewer."

This will define the struggle to reform academia. The system of biomedical research is already identified as being broken (Alberts et al., 2014). No matter how many recommendations are published advocating for increased postdoc salaries, reduced lab sizes and reforms to the scientific workforce (National Academies, 2014; McDowell et al., 2014), attitudes like this clearly persist within institutions and will prevent change to the biomedical system. This letter serves as an example that whilst there may be general agreement that the broken system needs to change (Alberts et al., 2015), the interest of institutions is bound to be a priority in discussions. As things currently stand, it will come at the expense of early career researchers (Powell, 2015). It will be interesting to see how UMD College Park, and the scientific endeavor, proceed.

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APPENDIX

Supplementary File attached.

Supplementary File: Letter from Life Sciences Faculty at University of Maryland College Park