



AAU NEWS

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STUDY RECOMMENDS POSTDOCTORAL EDUCATION CHANGES

The Association of American Universities, which represents leading North American research universities, today released a report that identifies postdoctoral education as one of the most significant developments in higher education in the last half century and recommends major changes in the policies and practices governing postdoctoral education.

"We've found that postdoctoral training is an increasingly important facet of American higher education," says University of Southern California President Steven B. Sample, who headed the AAU committee that wrote the report. "About two-thirds of the United States' roughly 35,000 postdocs work at AAU institutions, where they have an opportunity to mature as scholars prior to entering the professional ranks. It is incumbent on research universities to develop fair and consistent policies for the management of postgraduate education much as our predecessors guided the development of doctoral education a century ago."

The AAU committee defines postdoctoral appointees as persons who earn Ph.D.s or equivalent doctoral degrees and who subsequently perform research full-time under a senior scientist or scholar for two to three years before taking a permanent research position in academe, industry or government. "Just as the medical residency has replaced the M.D. degree as the terminal credential in the preparation of physicians, so has the postdoctoral appointment effectively replaced the Ph.D. degree as the terminal academic credential in such fields as physics and the life sciences," Sample says.

The report is the result of a three-year study by Sample's committee, which was composed of presidents, chief academic officers, and deans from ten AAU universities. The study included informal surveys of current institutional and departmental policies and practices.

The study found that the general lack of institutional oversight of postdoctoral appointments (coupled with the evolution of postdoctoral education in a number of disciplines into a virtual requirement for a tenure-track faculty appointment) has resulted in a considerable degree of instability within postdoctoral education as a whole.

"As with the Ph.D. at the end of the nineteenth century," the committee's report says,

"postdoctoral education is evolving as a series of ad hoc and unsystematic responses to varied and often competing interests and pressures. Most universities lack the kind of central administrative oversight of postdoctoral appointments that they maintain for undergraduate and graduate students. Moreover, most institutions appear to have few policies designed for postdocs specifically. . . . The lack of clear central oversight of postdoctoral education raises serious questions about how successfully institutions are meeting their obligations to postdocs as trainees and professional colleagues."

Among other things, the AAU committee study found that:

- Most institutions make little or no attempt to control the number or the quality of postdoctoral appointments on campus.
- It is common for institutions either to have no time limits on the length of postdoctoral appointments or regularly to ignore or waive established limits.
- Few institutions report having campuswide compensation policies for postdoctoral appointees.

In response to these findings, the report first recommends universal adoption of a standard definition of postdoctoral appointments. This definition stresses that such appointments are temporary in nature and have a primary purpose of "providing additional research or scholarly training for an academic or research career."

The report then recommends that "each university act promptly to develop policies and practices for systematically incorporating postdoctoral education into its overall academic program." It offers the following suggestions for achieving this goal:

- The establishment of core policies covering such matters as salary and benefits, faculty responsibilities for mentoring and evaluation, career advising and job placement, grievance procedures, and education in research protocol issues.
- The development of explicit guidelines for recruitment and appointment of postdocs and for the duration of their appointments.
- Periodic evaluation of the balance of interests among postdoctoral appointees, their faculty mentors, their home departments, and the institution as a whole, in order to assure that the legitimate educational needs and career interests of postdocs are being fully met.
- Career advisement and job placement assistance.

- Formal letters of appointment and formal letters or certificates of completion, to assist postdoctoral appointees in securing subsequent employment.

In addition, the report recommends that "each academic discipline consider the role of postdoctoral education in professional development in that discipline, and give careful attention to the extent to which postdoctoral education should be viewed as elective or obligatory by students for whom entry into that discipline is their primary professional goal."

"We are confident that postdoctoral education will play an even bigger role at the nation's major research universities in the years ahead," committee chair Sample says. "Thus, it is essential that those universities address the kinds of issues that the AAU has raised."