

Description

Completing a PhD is a very stressful albeit rewarding experience. Statistically, many scientists move to the US for postdoctoral training, predominantly in the sciences, owing to increased long-term career prospects. However, navigating the postdoctoral career brings different challenges with itself. Herein we provide a few tips on postdoctoral training in the US that may serve as a guide to your next academic chapter.

Overseas Postdoctoral Fellowships

The postdoctoral training period is an entry-level work experience within academia, allowing early career scientists to exercise their research proficiency. Moving overseas from your hometown to gain vocational experience can be a challenging, yet ultimately rewarding experience. Specifically, within the USA, there are a large number of early career opportunities and scientific/network development programs offered to postdoctoral scientists. Besides career opportunities, cultural differences too enrich an extended network with greater diversity and collaborative research opportunities.

Find a Mentor – Do They Meet your Expectations?

A PhD graduate starts out with a high-level of specialist skills, suited for continued training within an academic environment. However, the number of academic fellowships can be limited geographically for postdocs, compared to the graduate-level research experience. Moving to a different country to pursue a postdoc is a defining moment in the career. Consider the following checklist as a guide to choosing a mentor as a first-time Postdoc:

- Define your niche of research and what you aim to gain from further training.
- Analyze the research record of your potential mentor: the publications, previous and current trainee success. Make sure you check their availability.
- Collect relevant information about your research group, such as the size, their track record and your role in the group.
- Also try to know about the values that your mentor has: their leadership style, work ethics, work-life balance expectations, team spirit, whether they align with yours.
- Find out about the fellowships offered, their timelines and upper mobility within the selected university. Do get to know how far your mentor supports career expansion.

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- Make sure you regularly check the websites which advertise post doctoral fellowships across universities worldwide.

Focus on Your Career Goals – Do they Align with the Potential Employer?

At any career-level, it is vital to form a perceptive outlook, while also looking within to understand your potential. Most early career scientists are highly skilled researchers and have proven their work throughout PhD. The next chapter should promote this skill set, it is important to become aware of existing trends and seek support. For instance, before settling for a postdoctoral fellowship in the USA, ensure you have researched available scholarships. After that, evaluate your expectations from the career opportunity, consider the following.

- Opportunities beyond the lab – teaching, writing and data presentation at conferences
- Postdoctoral Career Training – consider opportunities for career development and expansion
- Specify your career goal. Whether your institution and mentor support continued academic tenure is another point to be made sure of. Your postdoctoral fellowship should act as a plateau or a launching-pad to academic research.
- Regardless of your research proficiency, ensure the fellowship provides a platform for grant writing and written communication. Writing skills are inherently useful for persuasive communication and career expansion in academia.

Bureaucratic Aspects of Travelling to the US

The process of international career expansion also includes the formal paperwork and visa processes completed before arriving in America. Most scientists diligently consider the bureaucratic process an exciting component of their academic journey, similar to what Swedish neuroscientist Jens Hjerling-Leffer felt in his early career research experience in New York.

The logistics of navigating work-visas and securing healthcare and adjusting to American work ethics can be intimidating however. Starting off at an American University is a calling card to an enriching work experience for career progression elsewhere, including Europe. Research mobility is a highly rewarding trait among academic nomads for international recognition and effective collaboration. To summarize, as a researcher, you should plan ahead, consider your expectations and find overseas career development support before you begin.

Are you planning a postdoctoral fellowship? What are the difficulties you are facing? Please share your thoughts with us in the comments section below.

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