

## Why has Duke created a postdoctoral policy?

Taking a postdoctoral position has long been the first step on the career path for many PhDs, particularly those in the sciences and engineering. Their advanced skills help Duke win the research funding that drives this institution. However, nationally the postdoctoral population has changed over the past 20 years. The average length of a postdoctoral position has stretched from 2 to 5 years. The increasing number of postdocs and the declining number of tenure-track positions means that postdocs find themselves in a “holding pattern” that an earlier generation of postdocs did not encounter. Postdocs are older and more likely to have families. More postdocs are female, and in their prime childbearing years. For these reasons, over the past 10 years postdocs across the country have lobbied for uniform policies, adequate compensation and benefits, and a greater emphasis on mentoring and professional development. Most major universities, including Penn, Stanford, Harvard, Yale, UNC and Vanderbilt, have already created postdoctoral policies.

Duke has approximately 800 postdocs, but has never had a policy that covers this special class of individuals. Consequently, the treatment of postdocs has been left to the discretion of the PI or administrative unit, and has varied widely. A fair, consistent policy ensures that everyone – faculty, staff, and the postdocs themselves – knows the rules, and that all postdocs receive equal treatment.

## What are the issues involved?

The biggest obstacle to the creation of a fair and consistent postdoc policy is tied to the source of a postdoc’s funding. Postdocs are encouraged to win fellowships, both to forward their own careers and to free up funding for their PI. However, due to conflicting IRS and NIH regulations, postdocs who win prestigious fellowships such as the NIH NRSA award cannot be considered employees. This is because the NIH classifies these postdocs as “trainees”, and does not provide funding to cover their employee fringe rate or federal employment taxes. Therefore, Duke cannot give these postdocs employee benefits like the Duke contribution to retirement without running afoul of IRS regulations. The result is that our “best and brightest” postdocs end up being punished for their success. While the loss of benefits like Duke retirement is problematic, more worrisome is the fact that many postdocs have families. These postdocs are likely to turn down awards if it means the loss of health insurance. Accordingly Duke loses both prestige and funding.

## How does the new policy define postdocs?

The postdoctoral policy defines two categories of postdocs at Duke. The majority are “employee postdocs”, or **Postdoctoral Associates**, who perform research in exchange for compensation and thus are eligible for most employee benefits. The second category is the fellowship/non-employee postdoc or **Postdoctoral Scholar**, who according to the terms of his/her fellowship is engaged in research for his/her primary benefit (rather than performing services for the University). The term “Scholar” was chosen to denote that the fellowship postdoc is specifically **not** an employee of the institution, in deference to IRS regulations.

## What compensation and benefits will postdocs get under the new policy?

Salary: The minimum annual compensation has been set at the rate of the NIH NRSA minimum for a postdoc with 0 years experience. Duke is only setting a minimum, and is not tying salary to years of experience. While raises will not necessarily be based on performance evaluations, PIs will be expected to provide a yearly written evaluation as part of their mentoring obligations.

Leave: Postdoctoral Associates will be eligible for 3 weeks (15 days) vacation. Postdoctoral Associates may accrue up to 20 days vacation (decreased from 30, as originally proposed). Accrued vacation will transfer if the Postdoctoral Associate changes labs or departments, but the Postdoctoral Associate will not be paid out for vacation upon termination. As with regular staff, Postdoctoral Associates are eligible for 12 sick days and 13 holidays/discretionary days, for a total of 40 days leave. As with regular staff, leave should be tracked by the PI/department, and use of leave should be discussed in advance with the PI.

Postdoctoral Scholars are not Duke employees, but trainees governed by the rules of their granting agency. Since Duke is not the employer, Duke can’t dictate a Postdoctoral Scholar’s leave. However, subject to the funding agency, Postdoctoral Scholars may take up to 40 days leave annually (the same number of days as Postdoctoral Associates – 15 vacation, 12 sick, 13 holidays/discretionary days). Leave does not accrue, and is not paid out. As with regular staff, a Postdoctoral Scholar should discuss use of leave in advance with the PI.

Postdoctoral Associates are eligible for Duke parental leave: 3 weeks of accrued vacation/sick time, followed by 3 weeks paid leave. Postdoctoral Scholars, because they are not employees and not paid by Duke, cannot receive paid leave. However, subject to the funding agency’s terms, Postdoctoral Scholars may take the temporal equivalent of 6 weeks off.

Benefits: Under the new policy, all incoming postdocs must enter Duke as Postdoctoral Associates, which means they must be funded for at least one month on the employee payroll. After the initial month, the Postdoctoral Associate may be reclassified as a Postdoctoral Scholar. As a former University employee, the Postdoctoral Scholar is then eligible to enroll in Duke health, dental, vision, and basic life insurance. In recognition that Postdoctoral Scholars are bringing money and prestige to Duke, 100% of the funding for health insurance for the individual Postdoctoral Scholar’s coverage is guaranteed. In the majority of cases, this cost will be covered by the institutional allowance. If supplementation is needed, the funding decision will be at the discretion of each School, with funding coming either from the PI, the department/responsible unit, or the Dean.