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Creating a Postdoctoral Program: Evaluation and Implementation at the Gladstone Institutes



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Network Nugget

Surveys are a great way to determine the postdoc needs and ensure accurate representation of them. Curious about other postdoc surveys and the results? Check out Stanford's [postdoc surveys](#) from 1999 and 2000 and the Baylor College of Medicine Postdoc Association's [results](#).

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In this first of a two-part series, [John LeViathan](#) and Erik Foehr at the J. David Gladstone Institutes discuss how the institute evaluated the needs of its postdocs and implemented a new program to address those concerns. John is currently the Human Resources Manager and Postdoctoral Fellows Contact for Gladstone. Erik is a postdoc. The second article will describe a recent follow-up survey that they conducted to learn how the program has fared.

Recognizing that the excellence and hard work of postdocs are among the "prime engines" that makes scientific advancement possible, the [J. David Gladstone Institutes](#) set out to redefine its postdoctoral fellows program in September 1998. Gladstone investigators and administrative officers recognized that there were critical issues that needed to be addressed to provide a training environment that was both fair and equitable. As a result, the Committee to Evaluate the Gladstone Postdoctoral Fellows Training Program (CEGPFTP) was born. Over the next year, the committee evaluated the compensation, length of training, mentoring, and career development at Gladstone. During the review process, input was sought from the principal investigators and, perhaps most importantly, from the postdoc fellows themselves.

The [process](#) began with each postdoc completing a questionnaire. The survey was designed to solicit opinions on the various aspects of the current program and to ask for ideas on how the program could be improved. The information that the postdocs provided was summarized in a report. Drawing from the concerns highlighted in this report, the Institutes formed seven subcommittees--stipends and benefits; adequacy of training; mentoring; duration of training and career path setting; career advice and job placement; satisfaction with choice of Gladstone for postdoctoral studies; and a catch-all of additional issues--to address specific issues. Each subcommittee consisted of one principal investigator and six postdocs, and each was charged with providing suggestions for improvements within their issue category.

In the spring of 1999, the CEGPFTP delivered its report to the president of Gladstone, Robert Mahley. Based on the recommendations outlined in the report, Mahley appointed three implementation subcommittees to develop specific plans on stipends and benefits, mentoring, and career development. Again, the subcommittees were composed of one principal investigator and six to seven postdocs, with additional support from the administrative office.

An additional finding, not anticipated by the Institutes, was that female postdocs had specific issues about being women in science. Concerned about these postdocs and this issue, the Institutes formed the Committee on Advancement of Gladstone Women Scientists to evaluate attitudes and practices toward female postdoctoral fellows and to develop a plan to promote women in science. In addition, a "Women in Science" lecture series was implemented, and the first lecture, entitled "How to get a job: Successful searches for postdoctoral fellows," was delivered by University of California, San Francisco, anatomy professor Zena Werb. The committee also sponsored a lunch discussion for Gladstone women scientists with Gladstone Distinguished Lecturer and Yale professor Joan Steitz.

By the summer of 1999, the recommendations for change had been distributed to all principal investigators, administrative officers, and postdoctoral fellows and a consensus was established on details of implementation of the recommendations. Meanwhile, Mahley, institute directors, and the human resources officer resolved specifics of the compensation plan and job classification. Then, in September of 1999, we launched the new [Gladstone Institutes Postdoctoral Training Program](#), incorporating many of the recommended changes (see sidebar) with a continuing commitment to improve stipends and benefits, mentoring, and career development.

Changes to the Status Quo

The new Gladstone postdoctoral training program incorporated the following:

- A [consistent salary schedule](#) based on years of relevant experience that includes a housing allowance and a relocation allowance for starting postdocs.
- A mentoring program that focuses on ensuring that investigators receive training and development on the most advanced mentoring techniques available.
- Implementation of a career development program to provide counseling, information on career opportunities, seminars with representatives from various academic and industry organizations, and participation in networking activities.
- The creation of a postdoctoral fellows coordinator position dedicated to provide postdocs support with all aspects of their training at Gladstone and to serve as an advocate of their interests.

The efforts to change the training program have been well received by Gladstone's postdocs, who feel

that they have helped to bring about significant changes in the compensation system and put Gladstone at the forefront of postdoc compensation and training. Interestingly, though, the process of examining the Gladstone program and implementing revisions had one major benefit that no one had foreseen: Postdocs felt that the really important thing was the Institutes' commitment to allocating the time and resources necessary to make revamping the program a priority. As a result, the postdocs feel valued by Gladstone. Says one postdoc, Alison O'Mahony, "It was an empowering experience that gave us a sense of truly belonging. And the postdocs responded with genuine commitment to the process. We are all now linked to Gladstone. It is a part of our academic pedigree, and our career success will be a function of Gladstone's success."

Together, the faculty, postdocs, and administrators have made huge strides in enhancing the postdoctoral experience at Gladstone, and their hope is that this approach to success can be mirrored elsewhere. However, they realize that this is only the beginning. To quote Mahley, "Although we have taken a major first step toward our goal, maintaining a program of excellence must be considered as an ongoing, evolutionary process and not a one-time quick fix."

So, the process continues. Even as we write, Gladstone is reevaluating the postdoctoral training program one full year after implementation. The CEGPFTP has distributed to postdocs a similar survey to the original so that the committee can get postdoc feedback on the program's first year.

In the second article in this series, John and Erik will share the success and challenges of that first year, and what Gladstone has learned from the process.

Established in 1979, Gladstone is a nonprofit biomedical research organization affiliated with the University of California, San Francisco. It is composed of three distinct institutes: the Gladstone Institute of Cardiovascular Disease, the Gladstone Institute of Virology and Immunology, and the Gladstone Institute of Neurological Disease. Currently, more than 100 research scientists and postdoctoral fellows are performing basic studies in cardiovascular disease, HIV/AIDS, and neurodegenerative disorders.

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