

## **Research Council Report: Policy on Postdoctoral Scholars and Postdoctoral Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst**

### **Background:**

The Research Policy subcommittee of the Research Council has undertaken a study of the need for and issues related to the development of a campus-wide policy on postdoctoral education. More than 200 Postdoctoral Scholars now study on the Amherst campus, and they appear to be the one group within the academic area of the University community not explicitly covered by campus-wide policies for recruitment, hiring, or career development. The number of Postdoctoral Scholars appears to have risen substantially over the last decade and we project that it will continue to rise with the increased level of research activity on campus. This report provides the rationale for the development of a comprehensive policy on postdoctoral education at the University of Massachusetts in recognition of the increasingly important role that Postdoctoral Scholars play in the success of this institution. We attach a draft of a policy in the Appendix. We developed this policy guided by the principle that a postdoctoral appointment is fundamentally an educational experience for the scholar rather than simply temporary employment in research. This report and the draft policy have been extensively circulated on campus and have been changed in response to the feedback we received from the campus community, including postdoctoral researchers. Since preparing this policy, an additional report has appeared at the national level from the Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. Our suggested policy is in line with many of the recommendations in that report.

The COSEPUP report is available to read at: <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/9831/html>

We began our study in the fall of 1999 by surveying department heads and graduate program directors of interdisciplinary programs to learn about the situation with Postdoctoral Scholars across the campus. From this survey we estimated the number of Postdoctoral Scholars on the campus and assessed some of the issues that are of most concern to the various departments. We also consulted research policy documents from other universities to learn about policies in place elsewhere. Finally, we made significant use of the 1998 report and recommendations of the AAU Committee on Postdoctoral Education at: <http://www.tulane.edu/~aau/PostdocEducationReport.html>

### **Survey on Postdoctoral Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst:**

Our survey asked the following questions:

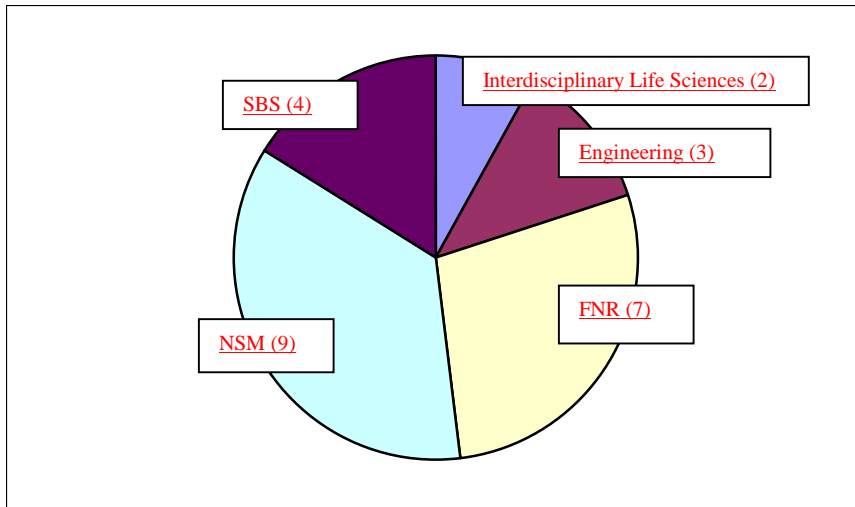
1. How many Postdoctoral Scholars are currently in your department and what is their average length of appointment? (for purposes of our initial survey, a Postdoctoral Scholar was defined as being within 5 years of the Ph.D. and not holding a permanent position.)
2. Do you have other appointees that you would describe as being Postdoctoral Scholars?
3. Does your department have any policies or procedures regarding length of appointment?
4. Do you have any particular issues that you feel are relevant to postdoctoral appointments at UMass that should receive our attention?

Thirty-seven departments or interdisciplinary programs responded to our survey, and their answers are summarized in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.

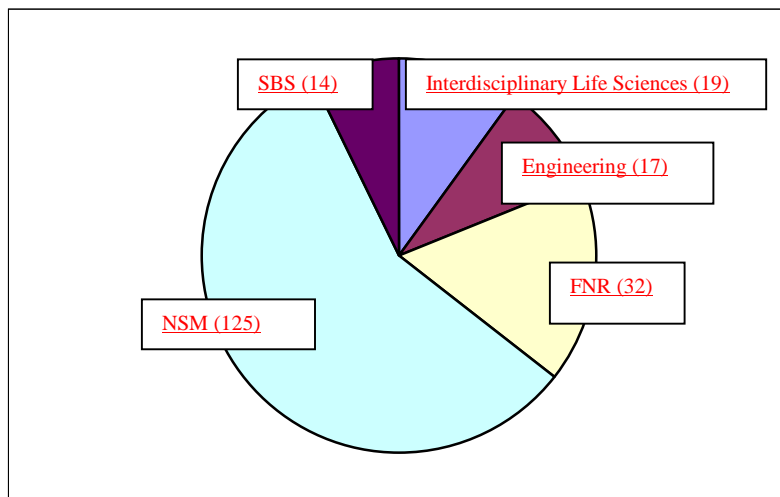
**Table 1. Distribution of Postdoctoral Scholars within Programs at UMass Amherst**

Unit (Number of Responding Departments/Programs)	Number of Departments/Programs with Postdoctoral Scholars	Total number of Postdoctoral Scholars
Interdisciplinary Life Science Programs (5)	2	19
Engineering (4)	3	17
Food and Natural Resources (10)	7	32
Natural Science and Mathematics (9)	9	125
Social and Behavioral Sciences (9)	4	14
Total (37 Departments/Programs)	25	207

**Figure 1. Numbers of Departments/Programs with Postdoctoral Scholars**



**Figure 2. Numbers of Postdoctoral Scholars currently appointed by Various Departments/Programs**



From the responses to question 1 we found that there are 207 Postdoctoral Scholars currently on the Amherst campus. Postdoctoral Scholars are distributed unevenly across the campus, with most of them holding appointments in departments related to the natural sciences or engineering. More than half of all of Postdoctoral Scholars on campus (125 of 207) are appointed in departments of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. The typical appointment of a Postdoctoral Scholar at UMass Amherst is 2-3 years.

In the responses to question 1 only a few departments reported having other appointees such a research assistant professors who might be regarded as Postdoctoral Scholars.

Although there were some specific exceptions<sup>1</sup>, most departments (including some with 20 or more Postdoctoral Scholars) have no policies or procedures on length of appointment. Only one unit (OEB) reported that national searches were held to fill vacancies for Postdoctoral Scholars, although we believe that many individual principal investigators (PI's) conduct national searches via advertisements in Science or Nature.

Several quite comprehensive responses to question 4 were received and several issues were raised. Most responses mentioned the need to deal with the problem of health benefits for Postdoctoral Scholars. Other issues raised included the need to provide more formal career mentoring as well as to standardize compensation packages and policies governing teaching assignments for Postdoctoral Scholars.

### **Comparisons with the AAU National Survey of Postdoctoral Scholars:**

In some respects the results of our on-campus survey parallel those of the national survey described in the attached AAU report. We quote from page 3 of that document:

- “1) Most institutions make little or no attempt to control the number or the quality of postdoctoral appointees on campus.
- 2) As was the case with Ph.D. students in the 1890s, most postdocs today are identified and recruited principally through professional contacts with faculty members.
- 3) 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.
- 4) Few institutions report having campuswide compensation policies for postdoctoral appointees, and few report making any serious efforts to ensure that foreign and domestic postdocs receive equal compensation (as is required by federal law).
- 5) Most institutions report that they classify postdoctoral appointees as employees with attendant employment benefits; postdocs themselves, however, list benefits as one of their top areas of needed improvement.
- 6) Few institutions have policies established specifically for postdoctoral appointees: most institutions report that conflict-of-interest policies for faculty and staff apply to postdocs, but few institutions have policies governing outside business interests, consulting, or teaching activities by postdocs. Moreover, procedures for resolving postdoc misconduct or grievances vary widely and are often nonexistent.
- 7) Virtually no institutions have formal job placement procedures for postdocs.
- 8) In roughly two-thirds of surveyed departments, all assistant professors hired in the last five years have had postdoctoral experience; in two fields-biochemistry and physics-more than 80 percent of the departments surveyed said they would not even consider hiring someone without postdoctoral experience. Thus, in these fields, a postdoctoral appointment has become the *de facto* terminal academic credential. ”

---

<sup>1</sup> such as the Graduate Program in Organismic and Evolutionary Biology and the Departments of Physics, Economics, and Psychology

In our proposed policy we have defined what constitutes a Postdoctoral Scholar and listed the components of a policy to govern postdoctoral education at this University. Our recommendations are not intended to cover those individuals who are employed as Research Faculty at the University. Such individuals are already covered by existing employment policies (e.g., Faculty Senate Document 92-015).

## **APPENDIX**

### **A Policy for Postdoctoral Scholars & Postdoctoral Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst**

#### **I. Definition of a Postdoctoral Appointment**

A Postdoctoral Scholar's appointment at the University of Massachusetts Amherst shall meet the following definitions:

- A. The appointee was recently (within 5 years) awarded a Ph.D. or equivalent in an appropriate field;
- B. The appointment is temporary (typically less than 3 years);
- C. The appointment involves primarily research or scholarship;
- D. The appointment is viewed as preparatory for a full-time academic and/or research career;
- E. The appointment is not part of a clinical training program;
- F. The appointee works under the supervision of one or more members of the graduate faculty in the university;
- G. The appointee has the freedom, and is expected, to publish the results of his or her research or scholarship.

#### **II. Policy Governing Postdoctoral Appointments**

- A. The length of appointment should recognize the temporary nature of a postdoctoral appointment and its role in the career development of the appointee. The total time spent by an individual as a Postdoctoral Scholar should not normally exceed six years, including previous appointments as a postdoctoral scholar at other institutions. Exceptions may be made provided that they are consistent with the prevailing practice in the discipline concerned.
- B. Postdoctoral Scholars must receive a letter of appointment signed by both the faculty advisor and department or program head. This letter must set forth the basic terms of appointment including the dates of appointment, the stipend level, all included benefits, a statement of the duties, expectations and research responsibilities of the Postdoctoral Scholar, and a statement that the Postdoctoral Scholar's appointment is subject to all University policies. The Postdoctoral Scholar must return a countersigned copy of the letter of appointment, which must be placed in a permanent file and stored with the other personnel records for the department. Any renewal of the appointment must include another countersigned letter as described above.
- C. The University waives the requirement for full searches for Postdoctoral Scholar appointments of less than three-years' duration. (This does not preclude such searches where appropriate.)

- D. Provision for a standard benefits package at a reasonable cost must be made that includes comprehensive health care but which may otherwise be tailored to the essential needs of a temporary appointment. Such a package would not include retirement benefits, although the option of enrolling Postdoctoral Scholars in portable retirement programs such as TIAA/CREF should be made available for departments wishing to offer such benefits.
- E. Campus-wide minimum stipend levels shall be set by the Vice Provost for Research. Where necessary, higher minimum stipends could be set by departments at levels appropriate to the discipline.
- F. Existing campus resources for career advising and job placement will be available to Postdoctoral Scholars.
- G. A Postdoctoral Scholar will not be discharged prior to the terminal date set in the letter of appointment or renewal of appointment, except for just cause.

### **III. Obligations of Postdoctoral Scholars**

- A. The conscientious discharge of research responsibilities, as summarized in the letter of appointment or subsequent revisions to or renewals of the letter of appointment.
- B. Conformity with ethical standards in research.
- C. Compliance with good laboratory practice including the maintenance of adequate research records and due observation of University standards regarding use of isotopes, chemicals, infectious agents, animals, and the like.
- D. Observation of appropriate guidelines regarding human subjects if applicable.
- E. Open and timely discussion with the faculty mentor regarding possession or distribution of materials, reagents, or records belonging to the laboratory, and any proposed disclosure of findings or techniques privately or in publications.
- F. Collegial conduct towards coworkers and members of the research group.
- G. Adherence to all applicable University policies, procedures, and regulations (e.g., intellectual property, maintenance of data, etc.).

### **IV. Obligations of the Institution**

- A. The faculty sponsor or mentor will aid the Postdoctoral Scholar in the discharge of the above obligations and provide regular evaluation (at least annually) of his/her performance.
- B. The Office of Vice Provost for Research will be responsible for monitoring postdoctoral policies to assure their consistent application across the institution.

**MOVED: That the Faculty Senate approve A Policy on Postdoctoral Scholars and Postdoctoral Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, as presented in Sen. Doc. No. 01-021.**