

Postdoctoral Bill of Rights

Version 1.0¹

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Introduction

Postdoctoral positions in the humanities have changed significantly in the past two decades. The traditional model, which assumes that the majority of one's appointment is directed at individual research, has largely been superseded by labor-intensive positions embedded in a department, library, center, institute, etc. These positions can be highly rewarding for institutions and postdocs alike. But there is little documentation about what makes a postdoctoral position successful for the institution, and less about what conditions will help a postdoc achieve their professional goals.

With this document, we seek to address this gap. This document is designed for those who are creating postdoctoral positions, supervising postdocs, or considering employment as a postdoc. We hope that those who are creating and supervising these positions will use this document to establish more ethical and responsible positions. And we hope that those who are employed in these positions can use this document to identify and advocate for their needs.

We were inspired to write this document for two reasons. For some time, we had been hearing horror stories about humanities postdocs gone wrong, especially in the digital humanities. We were warned to steer clear of exploitative, extractive, dead-end positions. Yet for many of us, postdocs were the best options we had, and while some had their problems, others promised to be periods of tremendous growth and satisfaction. Would it be possible to identify the differences between these positions and to articulate a set of standards for a successful postdoc? Our first goal is to advocate for our colleagues, to set expectations for postdoctoral positions, and to hold institutions accountable for exploitative working conditions.

At the same time, as we began to speak publicly about postdoctoral labor, supervisors and mentors began reaching out to us to ask for help. They were in the process of creating postdoctoral positions or supervising postdocs, and they desperately wanted to do their jobs well. But there was little documentation about how postdocs worked, or about what worked well for postdocs. Our second goal is to begin the process of documenting postdoctoral practices in order to move towards a robust set of community standards. We hope this document will be the first of many sources of information about effective postdoctoral labor.

¹ This document was collaboratively authored by the Postdoctoral Laborers Group and outside reviewers. Questions or comments? Contact Amanda Henrichs (akhenrichs@gmail.com) or Hannah Alpert-Abrams (halperta@gmail.com). Version 1.0 was released April 9, 2019.

What follows are nine guidelines for establishing a successful postdoc. Some are proscriptive; others depend on the needs of the individuals involved, and are intended to be a point of departure for conversations that may last for the duration of the position. We hope that this is a document that you will continue to refer to through every stage of the postdoc, from conceptualizing the position to writing the job ad, supervising the fellow, and helping them to transition to another position.

Let's make postdoctoral work in the humanities better for everyone.

Before you begin

A postdoctoral position can be understood as an opportunity for a junior scholar and an academic space (a department, library, center, archive, institute, and so on) to ethically assess a community's particular needs and the benefits of new labor that supports those needs.

For Supervisors: Before you begin, please ask yourself and your institution: Why is this position temporary instead of permanent or longer-term? Why does it require someone with a doctorate? What will the desired candidate gain from being a postdoc at your institution? What metrics of success will determine whether this position is successful, and whether it should result in a more permanent hiring of a qualified candidate to meet institutional needs? And finally, how will this position 'give back' to the postdoc by helping them to develop new skills and to build their research profile?

Remember that a postdoctoral position will significantly impact the life of the postdoc and their loved ones. Postdocs are not interchangeable: each postdoctoral fellow is an individual with particular research interests, skills, professional identities, and lived experiences. Creating a work environment that frames postdocs otherwise should not be tolerated.

While postdoctoral positions are temporary, institutions should consider their long-term plan well in advance. If it becomes clear, at the end of a position, that the work should be continued and that the postdoc is interested in supporting it, will you be able to retain them? (If so: what can /will it take to convince the PDF to stay?)

For Current and Future Postdocs: Are you interested in doing work that is outside your research area, with the goal of expanding your professional options or of transitioning into a new career? Then a task-based or project-focused postdoc may be a good choice for you.

Often we do not have much choice in the postdocs we take. Even when conditions are good, we often find ourselves hired into newly-created positions that are high on enthusiasm, but low on experience. Your supervisor may not know what you need, and so you may find yourself mentoring from below. We hope this document can help guide you in that process.

The Guidelines

A postdoc position is not a grad student position

A postdoc is not your opportunity for cheap labor.* [As the National Postdoctoral Association writes](#), “Postdoctoral appointees can pursue basic, clinical or translational projects so long as their primary effort is devoted toward their own scholarship.”

A successful postdoctoral position will be centered on projects that are commensurate with the postdoc’s skills and experience, and that will benefit their career advancement. This might include developing and implementing new research, teaching, or digital initiatives that draw on their academic expertise. You should consider why (or if) a doctoral degree is necessary for this position.

* Grad students aren’t your opportunity for cheap labor, either!

A postdoc position is a transitional position

A postdoctoral position is institutionally [defined as](#) “a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of [the individual’s] choosing.” In many academic disciplines, career advancement depends on the achievement of concrete goals outside of the mission of the department or institution: writing a scholarly monograph, for example, or publishing peer-reviewed articles.

A successful postdoctoral position will take this into account and provide resources, mentorship, and time to support this work.

A postdoc position is not the same as a full-time faculty or staff position

You should not ask your postdoctoral employee to perform service to the institution unless you can compensate them adequately by including it into the breakdown of their paid time. You should not ask your postdocs to develop curricular initiatives or to run centers or institutes. Nor should you expect digital humanities postdocs to work as computer programmers for your organization. Those tasks require institutional knowledge, expertise, and immense amounts of labor. In short, those are full-time, permanent positions.

A successful postdoctoral position will be of a scope that can be completed within the time frame of the position, and must be embedded in an institutional structure that will support the ongoing success of the project after the conclusion of the position.

Mentors and supervisors should take responsibility for the success of their employees.

A postdoc is by definition a transitional position, with the expectation that this position will serve to further develop the employee's career options. As such, mentors and supervisors must actively commit to promoting the employee's success in their chosen field(s). Successful postdoctoral mentors will recognize that the professional accomplishments of the postdoc will also benefit the mentor and the institution. Mentors and supervisors should help postdocs be new and/or visible presences on campus; they should be transparent with the postdoc as to whether and how much control the postdoc has over this presence.

A successful postdoctoral position can take several forms

It can be research-, teaching-, or technically-focused, or a combination of the above. If the position is a hybrid (eg, it is primarily technical, but carries the expectation of research), the split should be clearly defined in a written contract between the postdoc and the supervisor, dean, and/or mentor. Pathways of reporting and supervision should be similarly transparent. If the position is task-based, the employing institution should have completed an environmental survey (or similar self-evaluation) to determine a reasonable task and the time of employment necessary to complete that task. This self-evaluation should take place in the process of requesting funding for the position and writing the job ad; in other words, between three months and a year before advertising the position. This survey should not be the postdoc's first task upon starting the position. The employee should be provided with the resources, time, and mentorship necessary for success.

One Year is Not Enough

A successful postdoc position should be no less than two years. This pays back the financial and emotional investment of moving to a new city. It provides adequate time for training and orientation, which commonly requires six months. It allows sufficient time for the postdoc to make significant research or project gains. And it reduces the burden of the job search, allowing the postdoc to commit more time and energy to the position.

Both employer and employee should participate in negotiations that will benefit both sides of the arrangement

This includes asking for a higher salary before accepting the job, moving expenses, a yearly raise, an extended term, a delayed start date, a computer, working remotely, technological or physical resources (Mac or PC computer, office space, printer), access to library resources, and so on. A successful negotiation will provide the employee with the resources to do their best work, ultimately benefiting the institution as much as it benefits the employee.

Supervisors should be informed about campus resources

In a successful postdoc, the supervisor will be knowledgeable and communicative about the following:

- Training opportunities on campus
- Opportunities for formal faculty, staff, and peer mentorship
- Community support & mentorship for postdocs who are queer, women, people of color, have a disability, are parents, or have other specific needs
- Remote-working options for those in long distance relationships, with a disability, or with dependents.
- Childcare and maternity/paternity leave for parents
- Accommodations for disabilities; campus mental health resources.
- Basic logistics of the employment process for international postdocs, and on-campus resources for further information

Ideally, the supervisor will pass along documentation that new faculty hires often receive: for example, explanations of the health insurance process, navigating campus administrative structures, help proposing new courses, and explanations of any other important institutional tasks that a new employee must undertake.

Toward the end of the position's term, the postdoc should be able to request assistance in transitioning to another job

This assistance can take the form of time to craft job applications (both the mentor's and postdoc's time), money for job interview travel, reduction in teaching load, ability to schedule

teaching to accommodate interviews, etc. The postdoc should decide whether this is something that would be helpful for them, and mentors/supervisors should do their best to accommodate this decision. If another postdoc is hired to that position, the two terms should overlap. This will provide institutional continuity.

This document draws inspiration in particular from the University of Virginia Scholar's Lab, including the [Student Programs Charter](#) and [General Charter](#), the University of California-Los Angeles [Student Collaborator Bill of Rights](#), and the [Collaborator's Bill of Rights](#).