Pursuing Post-Doctoral Training

by

Sylvia Niehuis

University of Texas at Austin

As students enter their final year of graduate school, life after the dissertation becomes a major concern. The word "post-doc" seems to be floating in the air, but few can actually tell you what it is, how to get one, and what to expect of it if you do get one. This is certainly how it was for me before I started asking around. Here is what I found out:

The general consensus among people I spoke to was that academic positions are difficult to get. More and more, post-doctoral training is becoming necessary to be competitive on the academic job market. Among other qualifications, a number of publications in good journals are necessary for applying for a tenure-track position. Often, graduate students in their final year have to compete for a tenure-track position with individuals who have already had a post-doc and, thus, more opportunity to publish. For this reason, many students apply for post-doc positions, hoping to have more time available to publish, gain experience, and develop their own research program without being tied down by other responsibilities, such as full-time teaching.

Essentially, there are three types of post-docs. One kind of post-doc is funded by individual faculty members, who typically hire you to work with them on their research. The second kind is awarded to institutes (e.g., the Prevention and Intervention Research Center at Arizona State University), which solicit applications for post-docs and award them to suitable candidates. Training grants are sometimes awarded to multi-site training programs; the post-docs meet at a common site for orientation and are then sent to be trained at different sites. The third kind of post-doc requires prospective trainees to prepare a proposal for such training and submit the proposal to funding agencies. Most students are not aware that they can submit their own post-doc proposal to NIH; the acceptance rate of such applications is considerably higher than it is for regular grant submissions. Writing your own post-doctoral proposal requires that you have a good sense of the research direction you want to go and a commitment from a post-doc mentor who has expertise relevant to your research concerns. NIH post-docs, however, are only available to U.S. citizens or permanent residents. For further information, be sure to check out their web page (http://www.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm).

The experiences a person can expect to have in a post-doc will depend on who you work with and the nature of the post doc setting. Most post-docs will manage and analyze data and write up their findings for publication. Post-docs often are given the opportunity to sit in on graduate classes and, thus, to deepen their knowledge and to enrich their research skills. In some cases, post-docs can become project directors; this type of position brings with it many administrative duties, leaving less time for writing. Post-docs sometimes teach classes or help write grant proposals; both activities are very time-consuming and leave little time for publishing.

Students interested in post-docs typically start looking for positions early in their final year of graduate school. Host-funded post-doc positions are usually (though not always) advertised in the APA Monitor, the APS Observer, or the Chronicle of Higher Education. While advertisements for regular faculty positions tend to come out toward the end of the calendar year (e.g., December), post-doc positions are often advertised a few months later (e.g., in March).

Often, however, post-doc positions are not advertised in any publication. It is common, for example, for post-doc supervisors to send e-mail announcements to colleagues using a list obtained from a professional organization. For this reason, you should start to network at conferences and talk to the faculty members of your department. Ask them to keep you informed of any post-doctoral positions or training programs they know of or receive information about.

The process of applying for a post-doc position is similar to that of applying for graduate school. In your own interest, your first concern should be to find a post-doc that is a good fit for you in terms of your interests and training and those of your sponsor. In general, this person should not be your Ph.D. advisor. This is because one of the main reasons for pursuing post-doctoral training is to identify and develop your own niche in the field of personal relationships. In looking for a post-doc position, you are also well advised to try to find a position for at least 2 years. You will need the beginning of the first year to adapt to your new environment (e.g., find an apartment, move in, set computer and e-mail up) and you will spend the end of your second year with job search and interviews.

Once you have found a post-doc that you are interested in, you should expect to spend a fair amount of time and effort writing the application. A post-doc application typically requires writing a research statement. Get help from someone who has already been through the process of applying for a post-doc position (e.g., a new faculty member, recently graduated students from your department). Finally, get as much feedback as possible on your application draft before sending it out.

There are several issues to consider once you have been offered a post-doc. First, try to visit the person you will be working with. If you can't afford site visits, schedule a phone meeting and have a list of questions prepared. Although you might be very impressed with someone's published work, there is no guarantee that you will like collaborating with that person. Second, be sure you know what your sponsor expects of you in terms of time. Specifically, you will want to know how much time you are expected to spend on data management, analysis, teaching, project management, and how much time you will have available to work on your own work. Finally, talk up front about the possibility of publishing, particularly as first author. Researchers differ in how they feel about others publishing from their data. Some will want first-authorship based on ownership of data. For others, the decision depends on how much time and effort went into preparing the article.