



## Searching for a Postdoctoral Fellowship

A postdoctoral fellowship can be hard to fit into socially as you feel closer to PhD students, yet faculty are more your colleagues. At small research universities and non-science based departments, there will also be confusion as to how you fit into their administration, yet academics who have gone through this step all indicate a postdoctoral fellowship is a time to be relished.

If you are in your final years of a PhD program and considering about a postdoctoral fellowship, but have no clue where to start, this article will alleviate some of those worries

Those of you who have decided to pursue a postdoctorate (postdoc) career will find the following tips useful to navigate through the process of finding a suitable postdoc position for you.

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### Tips

#### 1. Self assessment

This is a step for you to realize your strengths, weaknesses, and most importantly: Do you really want to do postdoc studies? Talk to family members, friends, mentors and your graduate supervisors. Doing a postdoc maybe a golden opportunity to establish a body of work before embarking on a tenure track, where other obligations (e.g. teaching, meetings, and grant writings) are obligatory. A postdoctoral fellowship can define where you are going career wise.

#### 2. Pick your research area

Once you've solidify your intent, research and think of areas which are of interest to you. This is extremely important as it might mould your research area for time to come. There are generally three guidelines to this – first, complete change of field of studies whereby you apply the knowledge you've learnt from graduate school onto the new field. Secondly, stay on the same course and field of studies as your graduate projects. Thirdly, blend in your current research with new ones for your postdoc studies.

In general, a new area will mean fewer publications and more novelty, and the same area will yield more publications. All three options have advantages and disadvantages, so talk to mentors and supervisors as they are familiar with what's being offered out there.

#### 3. Visit your career centre

Here at the University of Alberta, CAPS offer services for graduate students in terms of career planning and provide on-site advisors to help you with any questions that you may have about the system. Learn how to network effectively (check out our topic on Networking under the Career Module), as this will help you connect with potential supervisors. Lastly, career centres usually have access to info on useful email list servers and hidden job markets.

#### 4. Stay connected

Build a strong network with potential and past supervisors. Get involved in others research, as this can be an excellent method to moving into an academic position. Use your supervisor's specialties to support your own research. Use conferences to meet with potential supervisors face to face and to see the research coming out of their research group.

## **5. Interview potential employers and visit the institution (if possible)**

This premise you used in searching for the right graduate school and supervisor still holds true. Considering that you might spend more than a couple of years there, getting to know the culture and people of the workplace is a good idea. Do they have a postdoctoral fellows association or office? Do they cover healthcare benefits?

Be blunt with your expectations – for example, clarify how much mentoring goes into the relationship and if you are interested in teaching, ask for the possibilities of teaching 300-400 level classes. Another important question that you may want to ask is if the potential supervisor is concerned with your professional development. Will you be first author on your papers?

## **6. Politics**

Assess the department's political situation before you make a decision to relocate. Check out if it's a collaborative or negatively competitive environment. And find out where your potential supervisor sits within the political circle. Do not burn bridges with past research group/supervisor, as those people may be involved in reviewing your next grant or employment application.

## **7. Life support**

To help you with your decision making, find out about the life support availability. For example, costs of living, child care, city life and campus life. If you have a family and/or spouse, choosing a place to meet their needs is also critical.

## **8. Talk to as many relevant people as possible.**

Maybe within your research group, someone knows of the institution or future supervisor and can give you valuable opinions on the matter. Or, a more direct approach is to talk to the current postdocs or research group members of that particular supervisor that you are thinking of. This, of course, would need his/her prior knowledge and approval.

## **9. Applying**

Applying to advertisements is relatively straight forward. You can also apply directly to researchers as they will need to write a letter why you should work with them, and they may also need to write you into a grant. When applying for funding, remember some agencies such as SHRCC and NSERC have a limited number of times you can apply for funding.

## **10. When to leave**

The decision to leave a postdoctoral fellowship is personal. Most people will however come to agreement that if you are unhappy in your new position, applying to another institution is an important option to becoming productive and healthy.

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## **Activities to Do On Your Own**

- Approach a postdoc in your department and ask him/her questions about his/her personal journey of obtaining a suitable position.
- Talk to your supervisor and try to get a candid consultation with him regarding landing a suitable postdoc. If this is not possible, talk to other mentors or faculty members in your department, your graduate coordinator might be able to help too.

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## Other Resources

- U of A's Postdoctoral Fellows Office's website at: <http://www.postdoc.ualberta.ca>
- U of A's Postdoctoral Fellow Association's website: <http://www.ualberta.ca/%7Epdfa/>
- USA National Postdoctoral Association's website. There's a link specifically for graduate students: [http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/site/c.eoJMIWOBIrH/b.1390001/k.B8C1/Graduate\\_Students.htm](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/site/c.eoJMIWOBIrH/b.1390001/k.B8C1/Graduate_Students.htm)
- The Perfect Postdoc: A Primer: [http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_development/previous\\_issues/articles/2730/the\\_perfect\\_postdoc\\_a\\_primer](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2730/the_perfect_postdoc_a_primer)
- Ten simple rules for Selecting a Postdoctoral Position: <http://www.ploscompbiol.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pcbi.0020121>
- Postdocs for Humanities: <http://chronicle.com/article/Postdocs-for-Humanists/46159>
- Postdoctoral Fellowships: <http://www.spo.berkeley.edu/funding.html>