Rock Talk

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Clearing Up Confusion about Postdoc Salaries and Training Activities

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We all know postdocs don’t spend every moment at the bench. I think everyone would agree that attending a professional meeting and presenting research results is a critical part of a postdoc’s expected responsibilities. However, lately we’ve had a number of inquiries about which activities postdoctoral fellows are allowed to perform as part of their official duties supported by NIH grants. It’s possible that the confusion arose from the recent activities surrounding cost principles for government-funded research. I’d like to try to clear up any misconceptions and highlight the NIH policies that address this issue.

Postdocs supported by research grants are employees of the institution. The NIH’s grants policy on salaries and wages follows the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB’s) Cost Principles Circular A-21, the guidelines that describe what costs educational institutions can and can’t charge to federal grants and contracts. Some Rock Talk readers may recall that OMB recently asked for public comment on proposed reforms to Circular A-21, and some of these proposed reforms include research community feedback collected by the A-21 Task Force I co-chaired with leaders from the Department of Defense and OMB.

So, what constitutes appropriate postdoctoral fellowship activities that can be charged to research project grants and other sponsored agreements? The guidelines allow compensation for all activities that contribute to and are intimately related to the work supported by the award, and that are consistent with the institution’s employment agreements with individuals in comparable positions. So, delivering special lectures, writing reports and articles, participating in seminars, consulting with colleagues and graduate students, and attending meetings and conferences can be supported according to these guidelines.

Postdocs supported by their National Research Service Award (NRSA) receive stipends set by NIH, and they are expected to devote their full time to the proposed research training, as outlined in Section 11 of the NIH Grants Policy Statement. When the stipend levels set by NIH change, revisions are posted in the NIH Guide (see NOT-OD-12-033 for fiscal year 2012 levels). Since the purpose of an NRSA postdoctoral traineeship or fellowship is to continue training for a career in research, all activities that contribute to this goal are permissible under these awards. Such activities might include laboratory research, writing research reports, reviews and journal articles, and attending and presenting at scientific conferences and seminars. Other training-related activities that would enhance a future scientific career might include teaching or overseeing students on projects related to the fellow’s or trainee’s research training experience.

I hope this helps clarify any misconceptions of NIH-supported postdoctoral activities, and allows postdocs to get the most out of their experience in this stage of their careers.

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