Preparing for a Successful Postbac Experience

Addressing Interpersonal Conflicts Throughout Our Professional Journeys

By Ashley Pratt

Training can be a vulnerable point in an individual’s career. Positive relationships with peers and mentors promote the success of early-career trainees, who are continually learning from colleagues and relying upon these interactions to propel their careers forward. Careful navigation, with the support of trusted mentors and resources, may be necessary for individuals who are facing challenges within their professional relationships. When I began my training as a postbac at the NIH, interpersonal conflict was not something I was actively preparing for.

The experiences of early-stage professionals have direct impacts on their long-term career goals. In the face of a mental health crisis among research trainees, positive relationships with advisors and a good work-life balance were found to be predictive of better mental-health and work experiences. So, perhaps a proactive approach to dealing with interpersonal relationships is important for trainees to consider throughout their scientific journeys.

Through my experiences as a postbac, I’ve come to find that positive relationships in the lab don’t just happen—they’re cultivated. Knowing what you need as a trainee, and the resources available to you, can help you proactively address the relationships with your mentors and peers. Like any other field, interpersonal conflict and challenges are bound to arise during research training. Although it might seem daunting to navigate new work environments and professional relationships, developing a skillset for dealing with these challenges is a valuable part of the training experience. Furthermore, there are many resources within the NIH to help trainees prevent (or address) these conflicts and advocate for their own career success.

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Letter from the Editor

In this month’s newsletter, Ashley Pratt, postbaccalaureate fellow in the Hoffman lab, begins a multi-part series on how to foster a successful postbac experience. Her first article broaches the topic of interpersonal relationships in the lab and workplace conflict.

Do you have a topic that you’d like to explore? I encourage fellows at any training level—from summer student to senior postdoc—to reach out with article ideas. No formal writing experience is necessary, and I will work closely with any volunteer writers who’d like to practice or polish their written communication skills.

While you’re pondering potential pitches (that alliteration was not intentional, I promise!), check out the slate of upcoming activities in the February Rep Report, announcements, and events. And don’t forget to reach if you’d like to contribute to future newsletter issues!

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

This is a newsletter for NICHD fellows, by NICHD fellows. We want to hear from you! Please send your questions, comments, and ideas to our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov.
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ESTABLISHING GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS EARLY
Training needs vary from person to person, and with so many work and mentoring styles, it can often be challenging to navigate our professional relationships. Individuals may have learning preferences, prioritize goals differently, or benefit from specific forms of support. These factors are important to consider when establishing expectations. Doing so as early as possible ensures that you can cultivate a work environment and routine that supports your own goals.

Reflecting on your needs and familiarizing yourself with available resources are good places to start. In the Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) Postbac Handbook (from 2019), Sharon Milgram, PhD, Director of OITE, and Yewon Cheon, PhD, Director of the OITE Postbac and Summer Research Program, state in the opening letter, “while senior investigators in your lab may provide some guidance, you will be expected to take responsibility for many things” such as “set your own schedule” and “actively seek learning opportunities.”

Knowing what you’d like to accomplish during your training, and what you need to make that possible, are decisions that only you, as the trainee, can make. Resources provided by the OITE, such as the Postbac Handbook, blog posts and information sessions, outline common objectives and opportunities for training at the NIH. Take advantage of these resources at the outset of your training to develop your own goals.

Once your own needs and expectations have been established, it is important that you explicitly communicate those needs with the people around you. The earlier you do so in a new lab, the better. By advocating for yourself, you can help others understand how they can help you. If you have specific goals that require reasonable accommodations, you can work together with your principal investigator (PI) to find a schedule or plan that works for everyone’s needs.

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR LAB CULTURE
In addition to setting and communicating your own goals, trainees should familiarize themselves with the preestablished community and culture of their workspace. Getting to know your PI, colleagues, and peers opens the door to helpful information and support. Trying to connect with these individuals as soon as possible, through informal

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interactions or scheduled meetings, is the best route to establishing familiarity in this new environment. Establishing expectations on both ends also helps ensure that you, as the trainee, are meeting the milestones of a successful and productive training experience.

Trainees should communicate their own needs, while also being receptive to the needs and expectations of the people they're working with. After all, new trainees are entering a work environment with a previously established culture and practices. Being upfront and asking questions can help prevent any toes from being stepped on. In assessing the dynamics of scientific teams, L. Michelle Bennett, PhD, certified Executive Coach and former Director of the Center for Research Strategy at the National Cancer Institute, and her colleagues found that many laboratory conflicts resulted “in part, from failure to state expectations explicitly.” In their commentary on the topic, they go on to state that “even something as simple and apparently obvious as work hours, when not addressed, can cause a great deal of stress for an investigator and uncertainty among lab members.” They suggest that mentors and PIs should write welcome letters and communicate lab expectations early on. As trainees, don’t be afraid to ask questions upfront to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Furthermore, trying to connect with one’s PI as soon as possible can help trainees voice their own needs while developing a relationship that is important for your future success. Depending on the personality of one’s PI or colleagues, a trainee may need to take initiative to establish these relationships by setting up meetings or seeking out conversations. In her book *At the Bench: A Laboratory Navigator*, scientist and writer Kathy Barker, PhD, states, “If the PI in your lab isn’t around a lot, take it upon yourself to stay in touch. Leave a note about a good result, pop into the PI’s office for 5 minutes, try to have lunch together. It’s your career, and you are the one to be hurt if the PI can’t remember you when it is time to write a recommendation.” Although doing so might seem daunting, establishing familiarity with the immediate work community is essential to cultivating a supportive environment.

**FACING CONFLICT HEAD-ON**
Conflict can occur in any work environment. If you've done everything you can to cultivate positive relationships and you still find yourself in the middle of a tense or challenging situation, there are many resources available to help you improve the conditions of your work environment. However, open communication is typically a good place to start.

In an interview with Erin Walsh, PhD, Director of the NICHD Office of Education, Dr. Walsh stated that a common problem she encounters with trainees and their colleagues/mentors is a lack of communication. Often, she adds, the main source of tension could be resolved if both parties were made aware of the problem through open conversations.

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Dr. Walsh also acknowledged that, unfortunately, sometimes open communication is not enough. You can always reach out to peers and mentors for guidance and support. But, if additional support and guidance is needed beyond your immediate network, there are many institutional resources at the NIH that you can turn to. Below is a brief list of those resources.

**NICHD Office of Education and NIH OITE**

Individuals within these offices are happy to help NICHD researchers and trainees by talking about the concerns and challenges faced by these individuals. Drs. Walsh and Milgram, the respective directors of these offices, actively encourage trainees to contact them to schedule conversations. If needed, they can point trainees toward resources that will be the most helpful. Many helpful individuals in these offices can be reached by email:

- Dr. Erin Walsh can be reached at erin.walsh@nih.gov
- OITE program-specific contact info can be found at https://www.training.nih.gov/contact.

**NIH OITE Wellness Program**

This office provides resources to directly address the well-being of trainees through seminars, group discussions and individual counseling. Organized events such as skill-building groups and wellness activities are available to help trainees reflect and develop tools for dealing with stress.

If you are facing a stressful work environment or relationships, wellness advisors are available to meet with trainees one-on-one for direct support and counseling. These individuals can simply listen to you or provide more formal guidance.

Information about these wellness resources, as well as wellness and resilience blog posts and other online resources, can all be found on the Wellness Program website.

The OITE wellness office can also be emailed directly to ask for more information or to schedule an appointment with a wellness advisor: oite-wellness@nih.gov.

**NIH Office of the Ombudsman**

Trained professionals in this office can work directly with you to address any concerns relating to personal, interpersonal, or group challenges you may face within the NIH. This office can provide confidential support.

The NIH Office of the Ombudsman can be contacted by email: ombudsman@nih.gov or phone: 301-594-7231.

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**NIH Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

The NIH’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP), through the Division of Occupational Health and Safety, is devoted to supporting the health and wellness of NIH employees. EAP consultants are available to discuss challenges and assess your needs if you are facing a challenging situation. These individuals can also provide guidance and coaching through workplace conflict. This office can provide confidential support.

This office can be reached by phone: (301) 496-3164  
Business hours: 8 a.m.–5 p.m., Mon–Thurs, 7:30 a.m.–4 p.m. on Fri.

If you are a victim of harassment or experience any other serious concerns that require an escalated response, the **NIH Civil Program** and the **Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion** can get involved formally.

By familiarizing oneself with these resources and considering these suggestions, hopefully trainees can feel more empowered to cultivate their own training environment to suit and support their needs. Science is a group effort. Therefore, these relationships are not one-sided and shouldn’t be addressed by the trainee alone. Mentors and colleagues can also support trainees by being conscientious of the trainee experience and directly communicating their expectations and needs.

**REFERENCES**


**LINKS TO RESOURCES:**

- NIH Postbac Handbook  

- NICHD Office of Education:  
  [https://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/org/dir/osd/mt/oe](https://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/org/dir/osd/mt/oe)

- NIH OITE Home Page:  
  [https://www.training.nih.gov](https://www.training.nih.gov)

- OITE Wellness Resources:  
  [https://www.training.nih.gov/wellness](https://www.training.nih.gov/wellness)

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP):  
  [https://ors.od.nih.gov/sr/dohs/HealthAndWellness/EAP/Pages/index.aspx](https://ors.od.nih.gov/sr/dohs/HealthAndWellness/EAP/Pages/index.aspx)

- Office of the Ombudsman:  
  [https://ombudsman.nih.gov/services](https://ombudsman.nih.gov/services)
The Rep Report

By Hyo Won Ahn, PhD

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the NIH Fellows Committee (FelCom) meeting every month and share the latest news with you here. Do you have a concern or question that you want brought up at the next meeting? Contact me, Dr. Hyo Won Ahn, at hyowon.ahn@nih.gov.

The 2023 Independent Research Scholars (IRS) program is now accepting applications, due March 1.
» The program supports early-stage postdoctoral fellows to transition to independent research positions.
» Participants will be given independent resources for lab personnel and supplies and will have the benefit of mentoring to assist with scientific and career development.
» Additional questions can be directed to Dr. Charles Dearolf, OIR Director of Program Development (dearolfc@od.nih.gov). For more information and application details, please review the Sourcebook.

FARE2024 is coming up! Abstract submission occurs Feb 15 to March 15.
» The Fellows Award for Research Excellence (FARE) recognizes the outstanding scientific research performed by intramural postdoctoral fellows.
» Winners of FARE awards will each receive a $1500 stipend to attend a scientific meeting at which they will present their abstract, either as a poster or an oral presentation.

The Health & Recreation Sub-Committee invites postdocs to join in an interactive virtual event, “Off the Clock,” featuring fun activities to help you get to know your NIH Postdoc colleagues. Grab your favorite post-work snack or beverage and join in this low-key opportunity to connect with others.
» The first meetup is on February 2 at 5:30 p.m. EST (virtual). Registered attendees will receive a fun mocktail recipe to enjoy during the event!
» If you are interested, complete the following Google form to receive calendar invites and email reminders.

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Check out these additional events and community-building opportunities:

» **Interested in Yoga?** Visit the [Bethesda Postdocs Slack](#yoga channel) for more information!

» **Weekly Running Group** – The Running Group meets outside Building 50 (near the canopy and outdoor tables) on the main Bethesda NIH campus. Runs are usually at 4 p.m. on Tuesdays and are organized via a separate Slack page. If you’re interested, you can [join here](join). All ability levels are welcome to join.

» **Montgomery County, Maryland announces free recreation membership passes for county residents in 2023!** The free pass provides access to fully-equipped exercise rooms, open gym activities, and game rooms at any Community Recreation Center during regularly scheduled hours.

The **Service and Outreach Subcommittee** invites you to a scheduled volunteer event at Manna Food Center on Saturday, February 11 from 10 a.m. to 12 noon.

» Volunteers will be sorting and packaging incoming food in their warehouse.

» The subcommittee is seeking about 15 volunteers (all volunteers must be vaccinated for COVID-19 and pre-registered).

» Email [alex.vendola@nih.gov](mailto:alex.vendola@nih.gov), if you are interested.

The **Women Scientist Advisors Committee (WSA)** will be hosting the WSA Scholar Symposium on April 13 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. The WSA Scholar Symposium highlights the outstanding scientific research performed by intramural women postdoctoral fellows and FARE award winners. More details to come.

**National Postdoctoral Association (NPA)**

» All NIH postdocs/fellows get NPA affiliate individual memberships for FREE! [Join now!](#)

» There are 28,500 jobs on the [NPA Career Center](https://www.postdoctoral.org/career-center). Upload your resume/CV for FREE!

» Introducing NPA SmartSkills: [SmartSkills](https://www.postdoctoral.org/smartskills) is a free, virtual course for postdocs who are members of the NPA. Monthly classes are taught by experts and focus on building skills critical to career and personal success.

• Upcoming SmartSkills: [Industry](https://www.postdoctoral.org/smartskills) (February 28 at 3 p.m.)

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Did you know that there are several ways to stay informed on postdoc activities and events?

- **Fellows listserv** is the main source of FelCom event advertisements, so don’t forget to sign up.

- Visiting fellows can also sign up for the [Visiting Fellows listserv](https://www.postdoctoral.org/visiting-fellows-listserv).

- There is an [NIH postdoc Slack channel](https://www.postdoctoral.org/slack) to connect with other postdocs and join social events (sign up with a non-NIH email).
February Announcements

THE NIH WORKPLACE CIVILITY AND EQUITY SURVEY HAS LAUNCHED

This survey is open to all NIH fellows and trainees who joined on or before July 17, 2022. Your participation in this survey is critical for shaping our efforts to create a workplace that is conducive to the highest quality of research and is inclusive, diverse, and harassment-free for all staff.

Last month, you should have received an email invitation from NIHWorkplaceCES@mail.nih.gov with an individualized link to complete the survey. Your response is confidential. No one at NICHD or NIH will have access to individual responses. The survey will remain open for a six-week period through February 24, 2023.

For more information on the NIH Workplace Civility and Equity Survey, please contact NICHDWDPS@mail.nih.gov or Jemma Robinson, Chief, Workforce Development and Planning Section (jemma.robinson@nih.gov), or visit the survey website at hr.nih.gov/wces.

GENETICS POLICY AND GENETICS EDUCATION FELLOWSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Beginning this month, applications will be accepted for the 2023–24 Genetics & Public Policy and Genetics Education & Engagement fellowships, cosponsored by the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG) and the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI).

For more information, and to apply, visit Genetics & Public Policy Fellowship and Genetics Education & Engagement Fellowship.

NIH UNITE: ENDING STRUCTURAL RACISM (ESR) ACTIVITIES

The NIH UNITE initiative was established to identify and address structural racism within the NIH-supported and the greater scientific community.

The ESR Intranet includes various resources like the Toolkit, Newsletter, FAQs, and other information.

UNITE Milestones and Progress and the Co-Chairs Corner (public ESR webpages) are other avenues to stay informed on UNITE efforts.
February Events

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1–2 PM
Postbac Seminar Series: The Medical School Personal Statement
Led by Erin Walsh, PhD, Director, NICHD Office of Education

If you are interested in attending, please email Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov). Zoom links will be distributed a few days prior.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1–4 PM
NICHD DIR Tenure-Track Investigator Virtual Symposia Series
“Consequences of fetal growth restriction: Child neurodevelopmental and postnatal growth outcomes”
Hosted by Katie Grantz, MS, MD

This series provides tenure-track investigators within NICHD the opportunity to organize a virtual mini-symposium to showcase their area of science to the NICHD DIR and larger NIH intramural community. These symposia are open to all faculty, trainees, and staff at the NIH.


WEDNESDAY–THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15 & 16, ALL DAY
19th Annual NIH Graduate Student Research Symposium
Hybrid event

The NIH Graduate Student Research Symposium is the premier event for NIH graduate students to showcase their research to the NIH community. All members of the NIH community are invited to attend.


ONGOING EVENTS AROUND CAMPUS
NIH-Wide Office of Intramural Training and Education Events
For more information and registration, please visit Upcoming OITE Events.

NIH Library Training and Events
For more information and registration, please visit the NIH Library Calendar.