The Perks of Being a Postdoc in Boston: Creating transparency in the benefits landscape

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INTRODUCTION | Postdoc positions originally served as brief periods of training between graduate studies and independent professorial or industry jobs. However, their duration has increased in recent years and current compensation packages may need to be re-evaluated. Many postdocs have found it difficult to struggle with high costs of living, partly in urban areas. They are often unaware of the variability in compensation and benefits between research institutions. International postdocs are especially affected since they may not be aware of the importance of benefits packages in the US. There are also differences in benefits between postdocs at the same institution. Additionally, institutional information is often difficult to extract from online or official sources.

To resolve this and inform current and prospective postdocs, the Boston Postdoctoral Association (BPCA) has compiled a comprehensive list of benefits offered by 16 Boston area institutions including salaries, types of insurance, paid days off, retirement plans, childcare, and family leave.

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GOALS | 1. Inform current and prospective postdocs in the Boston area on institutional policies on benefits and pay. 2. Serve as an advisory resource to institutional postdoctoral associations (PDAs). 3. Encourage discussions among PDAs, postdoctoral offices (PODs) and institutional administration about the status and types of benefits available to Boston area postdocs.

LIMITATIONS | 1. Only information on employment benefits is outlined due to space constraints. Information on all possible benefits can be found on our website. 2. The benefits categories defined here may vary in practice due to departmental or institutional policies. 3. We are not able to provide up-to-date information, but there may be inaccuracies due to recent policy changes, incorrect data interpretation or obsolete data captured from institutional surveys. 4. We could not prevent the complete list of all benefits packages in this poster, but complete information is available on our website.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | The BPCA collaborates with our member institutions’ postdoc offices and program managers to support the needs of our member’s postdoctoral scholars. Since 2016, representatives from PDAs and POs have met regularly to discuss opportunities to collaborate and to improve communication. We thank the postdocs that support the BPCA by providing us with information and helping us verify the data shown in this poster, and for their feedback during this process. We look forward to further academic collaborations between PDAs and administrative representatives.

ABOUT BPCA | The Boston Postdoctoral Association (BPCA) is a 16-member consortium of Boston-area academic postdoctoral associations and industry postdoctoral association representatives — a fully postdoctoral focused community. The BPCA was established in 2013 to support the professional development and advocacy needs of these early career researchers, thereby aiding in the retention of highly trained STEM researchers in the fields of life sciences, engineering, mathematics, and physics.

OPEN RESOURCES | http://bostonpostdocs.org/advocacy/benefits/

EQUAL BENEFITS FOR ALL POSTDOCS | Many Boston area institutions offer comprehensive benefit packages to employment positions. Most institutions offer reduced or no benefits to postdocs supported on external funding sources such as independent or fellow positions. Applying for external funding sources such as a fellowship in a time-consuming process often does not provide benefits from the institution. Top-match postdocs who manage to secure external funding may lose comprehensive benefits. Thus, postdocs may hesitate to apply for fellowships to avoid losing benefits. In 2021, the BPCA recommended that institutions "provide equal benefits for all postdoctoral researchers, regardless of funding source!" So far, Tufts and MIT offer equivalent benefit packages to both "employee" postdocs and "non-employee" postdocs.

Several other institutions have begun to discuss and implement benefit parity for their institutions postdocs. We hope that these efforts will continue as we strive towards our goal of equal benefits for all postdocs in the Boston area.

KEY FINDINGS | 1. There is a significant disparity between 'employee' and 'non-employee' postdocs in terms of eligibility for various benefits. 2. Minimum starting salaries are largely comparable, but experience-based compensation varies widely. 3. While most institutions set a minimum salary based on NIH NRSA stipend, a small minority is below the pay and pay above this scale, compensating for high costs of living. 4. Only a few institutions provide retirement plans with employer-matched contributions, and post family leave policies and childcare solutions are intended to vary widely.

CONCLUSIONS | 1. This represents the first effort to systematically compile and compare institutional policies on postdoctoral salaries and benefits in the Boston area. 2. This document will serve as a tool to inform PDAs and PDOS on ongoing benefit disparities as well as notable achievements. 3. This effort demonstrates that PDAs and POs can successfully collaborate towards an improved postdoc experience in the Boston area. 4. Encourage institutions to provide affordable and equal benefits, especially health insurance plans, to all postdoctoral scholars.

OUTLOOK | 1. Encourage institutions to provide affordable and equal benefits, especially health insurance plans, to all postdoctoral scholars.

2. Encourage institutions to provide a retirement plan with employer-matched contributions.

3. Advise for experience-based salary increments for postdocs at all Boston area institutions.

4. Continue to discuss options to improve childcare support and family leave.