Postdoctoral Scholar Survey

2015 Report

Emily F. Wood, B.A.
Michael J. Doane, M.A.
Jordan D. Clark, M.A.
Veronica B. Dahir, Ph.D.

Center for Research Design and Analysis (CRDA)
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Executive Summary

Individuals completing postdoctoral training at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) were asked to participate in a voluntary survey regarding their experiences at the university. Those who participated were directed to an online survey that asked them to report their attitudes toward a variety of topics, including their advisor or supervisor, career goals, and experience at UNR. The present report summarizes the results of this survey for 36 postdoctoral scholars who are currently working at UNR.

Overall, most of the scholars who participated in the survey had favorable views of their postdoctoral experiences at UNR. Almost 64% of scholars indicated that they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their overall postdoctoral experience at UNR. However, nearly 24% indicated they are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with their experience. Overall, participants are not satisfied with their current salary with nearly 43% of participants indicating they are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” compared to only 24% indicating they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” However, nearly 72% of scholars are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the mentoring they have received from their supervisor or advisor.

With regard to reasons for choosing UNR for postdoctoral training, the majority of respondents (49%) indicated that the opportunity to work with a specific mentor or advisor was the main reason. The next two top reasons for accepting a postdoctoral position at UNR were to work in the Reno area (24%) and because it was the best option for their family (9%).

Most scholars also rated their supervisor or advisor as “excellent” or “good” in the following categories: mentoring (69%), looking after your professional interests (69%), sharing lab resources (94%), fairness (83%), conflict resolution (67%), and communication (72%). In terms of perceptions of their departments, respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” that their department creates a collegial and supportive environment (56%), helps them obtain resources (70%), is a good fit (79%), and has fair procedures for all (64%).

With regard to evaluations, less than half of scholars indicated they had received an evaluation (42%). Of those who have received an evaluation, most indicated they had received an informal evaluation (e.g., e-mail; 53%). Slightly over half of the scholars (53%) indicated they would like to receive performance evaluations. However, nearly as many (47%) indicated they do not want to receive evaluations. Most scholars do not know what an individual development plan (IDP) is and only six scholars have written an IDP. Of the six that have written an IDP only half have discussed it with their supervisor or advisor.

The career paths that most scholars are currently interested in pursuing are tenure-track faculty positions with a research emphasis (41%), followed by industry positions (18%) and those who
are undecided (15%). Most scholars indicated that they believe their current postdoctoral position is preparing them for their current career goal. Most scholars indicated that they “strongly agree” or “agree” that they have received advice from their supervisor or advisor about career options within academia and that their supervisor or advisor would support them in any career path they chose. However, fewer scholars “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they have received advice about career options outside of academia (33% compared to 58% who disagreed).

The top three things that respondents indicated that the University could have done better to make their transition to UNR easier were holding a welcome orientation for postdocs, providing social events for postdocs, and offering support in finding housing options. The workshops and seminars that respondents indicated would be the most important for UNR to hold in the future included grant writing, academic career guidance, and funding opportunities. In regard to UNR daycare choices, 50% of respondents who utilized UNR daycare indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and 50% indicated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Regarding the Postdoctoral Affairs office, most scholars indicated that they know it exists (88%). However, most had not visited the office or visited the website. Of those who had visited the website, most indicated that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the website (80%).

**Methodology**

Postdoctoral scholars were asked to complete a survey describing their experience at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). Postdoctoral scholars were able to complete the survey online through a link sent to their e-mails. There were a total of four e-mails sent to scholars, including an invitation e-mail and three reminder e-mails. The invitation e-mail was sent to scholars on October 1st, 2015, and the survey ended on November 2nd, 2015. Weekly e-mail reminders were sent after the initial invitation.

There were a total of 100 scholars included in the initial e-mail distribution list. Of those 100 scholars, 2 never received the e-mail due to undeliverable e-mail addresses. Of the 98 scholars who received e-mails, 36 started the survey and 33 completed the survey (37% response rate; 34% completion rate).

The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Completion of the survey was voluntary; scholars were informed that if they chose not to complete the survey that there would be no adverse effects on their relationship with the University. They were also informed that survey responses would be confidential and would not be reported individually. All scholars were thanked for their time.
Demographics

Of the postdoctoral scholars who responded to the survey (36 scholars), 72.7% were male and 24.2% were female. Respondents were mostly U.S. citizens (39.4%), followed by individuals on a J1 visa (33.3%), H1-B visa (15.2%), F1 visa (6.1%), and permanent residents (6.1%). Most respondents earned their PhD in the U.S. (63.6%). Most respondents indicated their current salary before taxes is between $40,001 and $50,000 (66.7%). Three percent earned between $50,001 and $60,000 and 30.3% earned between $30,001 and $40,000 (see Figure 1). Participants who have held their position for more than a year were asked if they have received a raise in the past year. The majority (61.1%) indicated they have received a raise in the past year. The majority of respondents (66.7%) indicated they receive funding from a research contract or grant awarded to their supervisor, followed by a U.S. Federal Fellowship awarded to them (15.2%) and university department funds (12.1%; see Figure 2).

Most respondents are in a relationship and living together (54.5%), followed by single (24.2%), in a relationship but not living together (9.1%), married or in a domestic partnership (6.1%), or “other” (6.1%). Of the respondents who indicated they are married or in a domestic partnership, 88.9% indicated they live with their spouse. The most frequently reported household income of respondents who live with their spouse or partner is between $75,001 and $100,000 (see Figure 3). The percent of respondents who reported that they have children is 81.3% and most spend between $750 and $999 (33.3%) or $500 and $749 (33.3%) on childcare costs per month (see Figure 4).
Respondents indicated that before their postdoctoral position at UNR they were in graduate school (54.5%), at another postdoc position (33.3%), at another position that was a non-postdoc position (9.1%), or were looking for work (3.0%; see Figure 5).

Respondents indicated that they have held their current postdoctoral position from under six months (18.2%) to between four and five years (6.1%), with most indicating that they have held their position between six months and one year (27.3%; see Figure 6). The majority (63.6%) of respondents have had more than one postdoctoral position. Most respondents (63.6%) did not also apply for non-postdoctoral positions.

Participants were asked about the number of conferences they have attended in the last year: 36.4% have not attended any, 33.3% attended one, 18.2% attended two, 6.1% attended three, and 6.1% have attended four or more (see Figure 7). Participants were also asked the likelihood that they would present their work at a postdoctoral symposium held at UNR. Most respondents (81.8%) indicated they would be “very likely” or “likely,” 6.1% indicated “neither unlikely nor likely,” and 12.1% indicated that they would be “very unlikely” to present their work in this setting (see Figure 8).
Part A: Reason for Pursuing Postdoctoral Training and Attending UNR for Postdoctoral Training

Respondents were asked the primary reason they chose to pursue postdoctoral training. In response to this question, 51.4% indicated the primary reason was to gain additional training in their area. Others indicated they felt it was necessary to obtain a desired permanent position (25.7%), they were unable to find a different position (11.4%), to get training outside of their area (8.6%), and they were unsure of what type of career they wanted (2.9%; see Figure 9).

Respondents were also asked the primary way that they found their current postdoctoral position at UNR. The top three ways by which respondents found their current position was being directly contacted or recruited by their current supervisor (27.3%), from a job announcement in a journal, publication, or website (24.2%), and directly contacted their current supervisor themselves (15.2%; see Figure 10). The main reasons that respondents accepted their current postdoctoral position at UNR included the opportunity to work with a specific mentor or supervisors (48.5%), to work in the Reno area (24.2%), and because it was the best option for their family (9.1%; see Figure 11).
Part B: Perceptions of Supervisor or Advisor and Other Mentors

Most respondents indicated that their advisor is primarily responsible for supervising their postdoctoral training (86.1%) while some (11.1%) receive supervision from a faculty member who is not their advisor (see Figure 12 and 13). Most respondents indicated that they meet with their supervisor or advisor to discuss their project daily (41.7%) or weekly (33.3%; see Figure 14). Career paths are discussed less frequently with most respondents indicating weekly (22.2%) or twice per month (19.4%; see Figure 15).
With regard to satisfaction with their supervisor or advisor, 30.6% indicated they are “very satisfied,” 41.7% “satisfied,” 8.3% “neither dissatisfied nor satisfied,” 8.3% “dissatisfied,” and 11.1% “very dissatisfied” (see Figure 16).

Respondents were asked to rate their supervisor or advisor on six categories on a scale ranging from “poor” to “excellent.” When asked about mentoring, 69.4% reported their supervisor or advisor was “excellent” or “good” and 30.5% reported they were “fair” or “poor.” With regard to looking after their professional interests, 69.4% reported their supervisor or advisor was “good” or “excellent” and 30.5% indicated they were “fair” or “poor.” The majority of respondents (94.4%) reported their supervisor or advisor was “excellent” or “good” at sharing lab resources. Only 5.6% indicated they were “fair” or “poor” at sharing lab resources. When asked about fairness, most respondents (83.3%) indicated their supervisor or advisor was “excellent” or “good” and 16.6% indicated “fair” or “poor” with regard to this category. In regard to conflict resolution, 66.7% indicated their supervisor or advisor was “excellent” or “good” and 33.3% indicated they were “fair” or “poor.” Finally, when asked about communication, 72.2% of respondents indicated their supervisor or advisor as “excellent” or “good” and 27.7% indicated “fair” or “poor” (see Figure 17).
Figure 17: Perceptions of Supervisor or Advisor

- Mentoring:
  - Excellent: 44.4%
  - Good: 25.0%
  - Fair: 22.2%
  - Poor: 8.3%

- Looking after your professional interests:
  - Excellent: 44.4%
  - Good: 25.0%
  - Fair: 19.4%
  - Poor: 11.1%

- Sharing lab resources:
  - Excellent: 58.3%
  - Good: 36.1%
  - Fair: 2.8%
  - Poor: 2.8%

- Fairness:
  - Excellent: 44.4%
  - Good: 38.9%
  - Fair: 8.3%
  - Poor: 8.3%

- Conflict resolution:
  - Excellent: 38.9%
  - Good: 27.8%
  - Fair: 19.4%
  - Poor: 13.9%

- Communication:
  - Excellent: 36.1%
  - Good: 36.1%
  - Fair: 19.4%
  - Poor: 8.3%
Respondents were asked if they have another non-peer mentor who they trust in addition to their supervisor or advisor. Nearly 64% indicated that they do not and 44.4% indicated they would be interested in connecting with other potential mentors on campus (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18: Other Mentors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Maybe/Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a non-peer mentor whom you trust other than a supervisor or advisor?</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you be interested in connecting with other potential mentors on campus?</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part C: Evaluations and Individual Development Plans**

Respondents were asked what kind of performance evaluations they have received since they have been at their postdoctoral position at UNR. They were instructed to not answer this question if they have not received any type of evaluation. Eight respondents indicated receiving an informal evaluation such as an e-mail, four respondents have received formal written evaluations, and three have received formal oral evaluations (see Figure 19). Twenty-one respondents did not answer this question. More than half of respondents (52.8%) indicated that they would like to receive performance evaluations while 47.2% indicated they would not (see Figure 20).

**Figure 19: Frequency of Receiving Different Kinds of Evaluations**

- Informal evaluations (e.g., e-mail): 8
- Formal oral evaluations: 3
- Formal written evaluations: 4

**Figure 20: Percentage Who Would or Would not like to Receive Performance Evaluations**

- Yes: 52.8%
- No: 47.2%
When asked if they know what an individual development plan (IDP) was, 15 of the 36 respondents (41.7%) indicated that they did. Only six respondents reported that they have written an IDP as a postdoc (16.7%). Of the six respondents who have written and IDP, three have discussed their IDP with their supervisor (see Figure 21).

![Figure 21: Frequency of Individual Development Plan (IDP) Awareness and Use](image)

**Part D: Career Plans and Perceptions of Career Support**

The majority of respondents (65.7%) indicated that a tenure-track faculty position with a research emphasis was the career path they were most interested in pursuing when they first started their postdoctoral position. Other career paths respondents indicated were tenure-track faculty with a teaching emphasis (14.3%), industry position (11.4%), and 8.6% were undecided (see Figure 22). When asked about the career path that they were most interested in pursuing when they leave their current position, the percent who indicated tenure-track faculty decreased to 41.2%, tenure-track faculty with a teaching emphasis decreased to 8.8%. The percent of respondents who indicated they would like to pursue an industry position increased to 17.6%. Other career paths respondents indicated are listed in Figure 23. When asked if their current position is preparing them for their current career goal, 60.6% indicated that they “strongly agree” or “agree,” 21.2% “neither agree nor disagree”, and 18.2% “disagree” or “strongly disagree” (see Figure 24).

![Figure 22: Career Path Most Interested in Pursuing When Postdoctoral Position was First Started](image)
Only 25.7% of respondents indicated they have changed their career plans since they have come to UNR (see Figure 25). Of the respondents who indicated they have changed their career plans, two cited balancing personal and professional life as the reason. Other reasons cited by one respondent each included autonomy, change in priorities, difficulty in obtaining desired position, insufficient job security, and salary (see Figure 26). Some 33% of respondents are currently looking for a permanent job but not very seriously while 24.2% are looking very seriously for a permanent job, 30.3% are not currently looking and 3.0% have already found a permanent job (see Figure 27).
Respondents were asked about their perceptions of receiving career advice and support from their supervisor or advisor. When asked if they have received advice from their supervisor or advisor on career options outside of academia, 33.3% indicated they “strongly agree” or “agree,” 33.3% indicated they “neither agree nor disagree,” and 33.4% indicated they “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” When asked if they have received advice from their supervisor or advisor on career options within academia, 58.4% indicated they “strongly agree” or “agree,” 22.2% indicated they “neither agree nor disagree,” and 19.5% indicated they “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” When asked if their supervisor or advisor would support them in any career path they chose, 69.4% indicated they “strongly agree” or “agree,” 19.4% indicated they “neither agree nor disagree,” and 11.2% indicated they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” (see Figure 28).
Part E: Perceptions of University and Department

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of their department. Most respondents (57.5%) “strongly agree” or “agree” that their department created a collegial and supportive environment, 21.2% “neither agree nor disagree,” and 21.3% “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” When asked to indicate if their department helps them obtain the resources they need, 69.7% “strongly agree” or “agree,” 15.2% “neither agree nor disagree,” and 15.2% “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” Most respondents (69.7%) “strongly agree” or “agree” that their department is a good fit for them, while 12.1% “neither agree nor disagree” and 18.2% “disagree.” Again, most respondents (69.7%) “strongly agree” or “agree” that their departments’ procedures are fair to all, 12.1% “neither agree nor disagree,” and 24.3% “disagree” or “strongly disagree” (see Figure 29).

![Figure 29: Perceptions of Department](image)

Participants were asked what the University could have done better to make their transition to UNR easier. The most frequent responses included holding a welcome orientation for postdocs (12), providing social events for postdocs (11), offering support for finding housing options (10), having a postdoctoral association (9), nothing, my transition was fine (9), holding a benefits information session (8), and a university resources information session (8; see Figure 30).
Participants were asked about their satisfaction with their current salary on a scale from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied.” Most (42.5%) indicated they were “very dissatisfied” or “dissatisfied,” 33.3% indicated they were “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” and 24.3% indicated they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (see Figure 31). Participants were also asked about the satisfaction with UNR daycare choice, 50.0% indicated they were “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” 16.7% indicated they were “dissatisfied,” 33.3% indicated that they were “very dissatisfied,” none of the respondents indicated that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (see Figure 32).
Participants were asked about their overall satisfaction with their postdoctoral experience at UNR. Most respondents (63.7%) indicated that they are “very satisfied” or “satisfied,” 12.1% indicated that they are “neither dissatisfied nor satisfied,” and 24.2% indicated that they are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” (see Figure 33).

**Figure 33: Overall Satisfaction with Postdoctoral Experience at UNR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very dissatisfied</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part F: Knowledge and Perceptions of the Postdoctoral Affairs Office**

Participants were asked if they knew that there is a Postdoctoral Affairs office on campus. Most respondents (87.9%) indicated that they were aware of the office. However, most (69.7%) had not visited the office at the time of the survey. Participants were also asked if they had ever visited the Postdoctoral Affairs website. The majority of respondents (69.7%) had not visited the website at the time they took this survey. Participants who indicated they had visited the website (30.3%) were asked about their satisfaction with the Postdoctoral Affairs website. None of the respondents indicated they were “very dissatisfied” or “dissatisfied,” 20.0% indicated that they were “neither dissatisfied nor satisfied,” and 80% indicated they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (see Figure 34). Participants who indicated they had visited the website were asked to provide any comments or suggestions about the website however, but none of the respondents provided a comment.

**Figure 34: Satisfaction with Postdoctoral Affairs Website**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part G: Future Seminars and Workshops Offered by UNR

Participants were asked to rank a list of possible workshops or seminars that UNR could offer in order of importance with 1 being the “most important” and 11 being the “least important.” The greatest number of participants (11) ranked grant writing as either the “most important or second most important.” Ten participants ranked academic career guidance and funding opportunities as the most or second most important. The next highest ranked seminar or workshop was non-academic career guidance which five participants ranked as the most or second most important. See Figure 35 for a full list of responses.

![Figure 35: Number of Participants who Listed each Possible Seminar/Workshop as Most or Second Most Important](image)

Part H: Open-ended Response about Postdoctoral Experience at UNR

Respondents were asked to give an open-ended response to the following question: “Please use the space below to provide any additional comments or suggestions about this survey or your postdoc experience at UNR.”

Four postdoctoral scholars answered this question. Responses included requests for postdoc salary increases, improved daycare options, criticisms of mentors, and satisfaction with the postdoctoral experience at UNR. Please refer to the Appendix for a complete list of postdoctoral scholars’ responses.
Appendix

Open-ended responses to “Please provide any additional comments or suggestions about this survey or your postdoc experience at UNR.”