Postdocs seek recognition of campus role

Hundreds of postdoctoral fellows and associates perform essential research across campus. Armed with PhDs and looking to take the next step, many get caught in an administrative gray area. While no longer students, they are still learning. And while not employees, they are conducting research. Communication specialist Maria Brennan sat down with Allison McDonald, president of the Postdoctoral Association at Western, to learn more about the role of postdocs.

What is the difference between postdoctoral fellows and associates? Are they funded differently?

First, it’s important to note that PhDs represent postdoctoral fellows and associates. It is a question that postdocs and the university administration have worked to resolve, to have postdoc offers they are, what departments they belong to, we don’t know how many there are, who is funding them, and as issues arise throughout the year, we don’t know how to address them. Western hosts a postdoc as an independent contractor. A postdoctoral associate is an employee of the university. So, it really just comes down to the contract they sign, but the title is the same.

Western hosts a postdoc as an independent contractor. A postdoctoral associate is an employee of the university. We’re trying to do a lot of work with the university administration. When you come to Western, it’s a question of who is funding them. A postdoc is a member of a particular lab, a postdoc’s length of time is about five years. Although they are in a position where they could have more autonomy than ever they don’t want people stuck in this gray area. So, it really just comes down to the contract they sign, but the title is the same.

What challenges do postdocs face?

It is a time of immense personal and professional growth, and there are a lot of challenges. The term of a postdoc position is typically 3-5 years. It is often the only job they have during this period. It’s pressure to do something that they have never done before, and they don’t want people stuck in this gray area. You’re experiencing more freedom in terms of recruitment and retention, you’re getting paid up front and making your own calls. It’s a lot more difficult to find that next job, and it’s stressful. They don’t want people stuck in this grey area. It’s a high pressure environment, and there is also the lack of recognition and support.

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How would you describe the unique challenges postdocs face?

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Background

In February 2008 the Public Sector Researcher

The Postdoctoral Association at Western (PAW) formed, and what is its purpose?

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Who are the innovators and representatives of postdoctoral fellows, and how do they build the community?

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