

Postdocs seek recognition of unique campus role

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

When was the Postdoctoral Association at Western (PAW) formed, and what is its mandate?

PAW was officially formed in 2004. It acts as a collective voice for postdocs on issues of interest to the group and disseminates relevant information. PAW also co-ordinates professional development opportunities for postdocs, and serves as a liaison between postdocs and university administration.

If you're a postdoc, you fall under PAW. There are no membership fees. Once a year, we hold an annual general meeting and as issues arise throughout the year, we hold meetings as needed.

How many postdocs are at Western?

There is estimated to be between 250 and 400 postdocs on campus. The problem is there's no central registration process in place and it's a very fluid population, with people coming and going. There is no central mechanism in place to know when the person started at Western, how long they're here for, and when they leave. That's one of the big challenges – we don't know how many there are, who they are, what departments they belong to, where they are physically located on campus. That's one of the things we're trying to resolve, to have postdoc offers processed through a central office.

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

First, it's important to note that PAW represents postdoctoral fellows and associates at Western – we don't make a distinction.

Western defines a postdoctoral fellow as an independent contractor. A postdoctoral associate is an employee of the university.

So, it really just comes down to the contract they sign and what the individual wants, as to whether they want to be an associate, and with that comes the benefits of being an employee – contributing to CPP, EI, etc., or whether they feel better about getting paid up front and making their own arrangements to pay taxes later. It depends on the person's situation when they come to Western.

For example, if they are planning for a parental leave, they might want to know they can count on EI, but if that's not on their radar, they might rather get the money now and pay taxes later. It is up to the individual to choose what's best for them. They then go to their supervisor to negotiate an arrangement that works for both parties.

We're having problems, though, getting the university to lock down a diagnostic tool to help individuals decide what's better for them. So, defining fully if you choose to be a fellow, here's what you get, and if you choose to be an associate, here's what you get. It would be nice to have a table that clearly outlines it for everyone, because it's not just postdocs who are confused; supervisors haven't often thought of this either. It's good for individuals to have the option of being either a fellow or an associate, as long as they understand what they're getting with both.

How would you describe the unique role postdocs play on campus?

Postdocs are the ultimate knowledge workers on campus. They play a really

Background

In February 2008 the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) filed an application with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) seeking to represent all postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral associates at Western. In September 2008, the OLRB issued a certificate providing that PSAC represented the postdoctoral associates on campus. The university is currently in negotiations with PSAC for a first collective agreement for postdoctoral associates.

vital role in research and development. They are the innovators and represent the future of where research is going to go in Canada.

A postdoc is often considered an extension of the training period. It's when you start gaining some of that research independence, and determine what it is you want to investigate further in your career. You can spread your wings a bit, and have more autonomy than ever before. You're going from being a student to an independent researcher.

While there isn't a teaching requirement, postdocs are expected to mentor graduate and undergraduate students. Postdocs are usually quite happy to provide answers to their personal and professional questions, and perhaps are seen as more of a peer than a faculty member.

Typically, how long does one hold a postdoc position?

This is highly variable. Normally at Western a postdoc is offered a one-year appointment, and there will usually be an option to re-new after a year if everything is working out. So the typical postdoc length for most people is about two years.

Western has decided that a person can't be a postdoc here for more than five years. They're hoping after one or two postdocs, you're finished your training and you'll be finding a job. The idea is that they don't want people stuck in this grey

area, training forever; they want people moving on. The other thing is if someone decides they like the lab, the money is there, and they want to stay, they can transition from a postdoc to a more permanent kind of position like a research scientist, or a research associate. I think the five years is a good and reasonable time limit.

What unique challenges do postdocs face?

It is a time of immense personal and professional growth, and there are a lot of changes going on. Also, there is a lot of pressure to be extremely productive during this period. There's pressure in terms of the research, but also in terms of securing a job for the future. It's pretty stressful.

You're experiencing more freedom in terms of what you're exploring than you had doing a PhD, so it's less structured. But, that's also the thing that makes it inherently more challenging. You have a lot of freedom, more options – but sometimes having a lot of choices is more stressful. Also, finding that next job and hoping it's a permanent one is something many postdocs experience a lot of stress over. And of course, right now with the economy, there are fewer jobs on the market.

There is also the lack of recognition on campus. People don't know who postdocs are, and I think that contributes to the stress. Postdocs are just looking to be acknowledged and to have their contributions to the research enterprise recognized. For example, sometimes you see opportunities for staff, faculty, undergraduates and graduate students, but postdocs are often left out of the equation.

The university president does host a function for postdocs each fall, which is great. But, we need more social events to build the community, and to recognize that postdocs can feel isolated. They might be working in a lab and there aren't any other

postdocs there, and they don't know who the other postdocs are in their department. That's something that could be fixed easily – perhaps a brown bag lunch once a week to get to know each other.

Also, it would be great to see research or travel awards specifically for postdocs, a pot of money they can access that they could use to show their research to the international community and help put Western on the map.

There is also some confusion about services on campus, and this needs clarification. The problem historically is that there hasn't been a home for postdocs. That changed when the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies was created a year and a half ago. This has been extremely helpful and things are starting to move in the right direction, which is good. We're trying to do a lot of work with that office to get things up and running, but we'd like them to be the centralized entity where you come in as a new postdoc, check in through that office and then we'd have an idea of the numbers and could better educate other offices on campus. For example, if a postdoc walks into the Career Centre on campus, the centre could provide the kinds of things they're looking for, and offer programming tailored to their specific needs.

The biggest challenge is that I can't go to any office on campus and find out who the postdocs are and how I can contact them. It's a bit ridiculous frankly. I can't communicate with them; I can't represent them as PAW president if I don't know who they are. But it's not just a Western problem, you'll find the same problem at other universities, not keeping track of their postdocs.

In terms of recruitment and retention, the University of Alberta has a postdoc office, and a person dedicated to serving them. We have to compete with other institutions that clearly define how things work. Some things (at Western) are just not there yet, but hopefully we'll be there shortly.

Knowing who the postdocs are on campus and how we can communicate with them is the first step. It comes down to status, respect and clarity.

INTERVIEW

Allison McDonald

Titles: President, Postdoctoral Association at Western (PAW) postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Biology

Age: 34

Family: Husband Daniel; son Avery (7), daughter Sydney (3)

Roots: Born in North York, calls Simcoe her hometown; currently lives in London

Degrees: BSc and Master's from Queen's University; PhD from the University of Toronto

Science is second nature: As a child, McDonald "always watched National Geographic specials and The Nature of Things, and I was really interested in plants." After taking first-year biology at Queen's, she was hooked and hasn't looked back. "My parents were great – 'Do whatever you want to do, just be happy doing it. Make enough money to get by, but you have to enjoy it.' There wasn't a lot of pressure to do a certain thing."

Finding her way to Western: During her time at the University of Toronto, McDonald met Jim Staples (associate professor in Western's Department of Biology) at a few conferences and now Jim and Norm Hüner are her postdoc advisors here. "I was awarded the Helen Battle Postdoctoral Fellowship in Biology and the same year, I received an NSERC award. That, and Western's top-notch research reputation, brought me here."

Research: McDonald studies the physiological response to stress in a wide variety of organisms, focusing on the mitochondria – the power plants of the cell. Specifically, she works on an enzyme called alternative oxidase that bypasses some normal steps in how mitochondria make energy and is trying to figure out why many organisms still use it. Her work could eventually have applications in the treatment of human mitochondrial diseases like ALS or Huntington's.

Life on campus: "My work is pretty varied, that's what I like about it. I could be conducting experiments in the lab, or conceptualizing future experiments, and there is a fair amount of writing to do, for grants, etc. I have a lot of interaction with people, which I like – I need that variety. There is also the service component – my work as president of PAW, and I'm the post-doctoral representative on the executive of the Canadian Society of Plant Physiologists." McDonald also acts as an inspiration to young female students who often ask her how she balances motherhood with a thriving research career. "I tell them that you can definitely do both, you just have to be organized."

Life off-campus: "I think I have a good balance – when I'm at the university, I wear my scientist hat and at home I wear my 'mom' hat. Having children has provided me with a good perspective on things." McDonald's pastimes include reading non-fiction ("mostly about nature!") and putting in the garden. "My husband just bought me a scuba diving gift certificate, so I may pursue that soon."

Future goals: "My ultimate goal is to secure an assistant professor position at a research university in Canada."

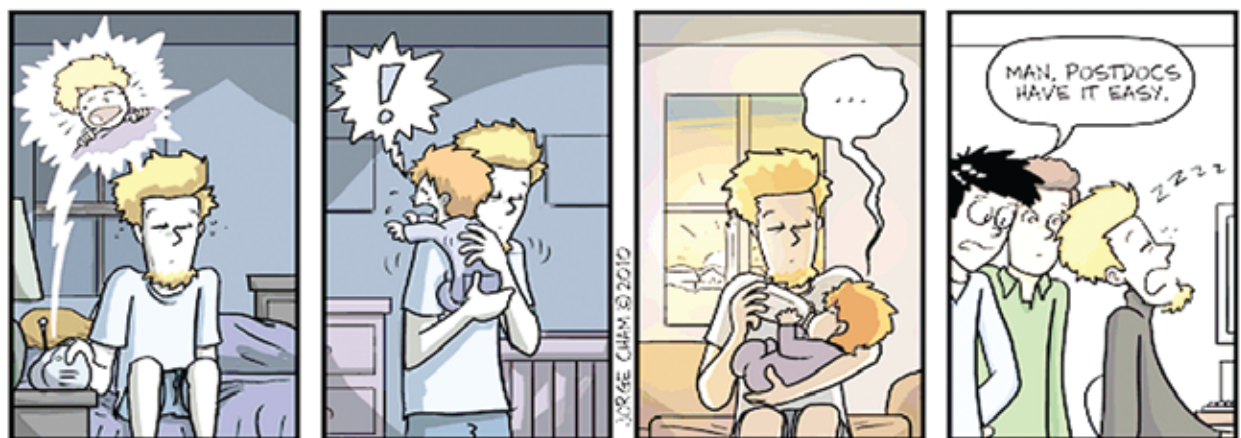
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