The postdoctoral apprenticeship

Much has been written already about whether the scientific machine is churning out too many PhDs and postdocs when there are a limited number of academic jobs and the competition for funding and space in competitive journals is intense. But gratifyingly, there exists a vast array of other scientific careers. We need to mentor and advise trainees about the diverse and rewarding professional opportunities that are available beyond the postdoctoral apprenticeship period.

It will always be noble to pursue the study of science, and those with the dedication and intelligence to pursue advanced degrees in scientific fields are certainly capable of making palpable contributions to society. But with only approximately 15% of all postdoctoral trainees nationwide going on to academic positions (1), becoming a tenure-track faculty member should no longer be considered the traditional path through science. I’d argue becoming a professor is the “alternative” career path these days.

So what else can you be with a PhD or MD? Science. It will always be noble to pursue the study of science, and those with the determination and grit to get graduate degrees are currently offered an entry-level salary (at many institutions that follow the NIH guidelines) that comes out to between $11 (80h/week) and $21 (40h/week) an hour (~$44,000 salary). These rates don’t come anywhere near the same range as skilled, entry-level positions in fields outside of science. Beyond my JCI role, I now also work at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSK), and can report that we have joined several peer institutions in raising postdoc pay to a minimum of $50,000 a year. This new minimum salary is in compliance with the changes to the Fair Labor Standards Act, which mandates that after December 1, 2016, employers must pay overtime to any salaried employee earning less than $47,476. [There is some ongoing debate as to whether postdocs are employees, but why quibble?] I can think of few postdocs at MSK, nor many at any of the five other universities I’ve been affiliated with, who work fewer than 40 hours a week. We have been lucky at MSK to consistently recruit super high-quality postdocs and are making this move to a $50,000 baseline salary to ensure that we continue to attract and retain talented postdocs. It is our hope to continue to increase this minimum, keeping in mind that the cost of living in NYC is higher, but all the while keeping in mind the tight budgets imposed by many funding agencies in the USA. Regardless of these constraints, all scientific institutions should be encouraged to meet or exceed this new threshold.

It is an enormously exciting time to be a scientist today. We should be proud to be scientists, and to be training future scientists no matter what venue they choose.

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