

Memorandum

To: WHOI Postdoctoral Scholars, Fellows and Investigators and their Advisors

From: Diane Foster

Date: July 18, 2025

Re: Guidelines for Discussing Advisor-Postdoc Expectations and Responsibilities

As we know, the postdoctoral experience can be a time of great intellectual and personal growth for an early career researcher. Beyond completing impactful research, it can also provide valuable insight on passions and potential future pathways. A positive and rewarding postdoc experience benefits from open conversations between mentors and postdocs about mutual expectations and responsibilities. Attached is a 2-page document that you can use for an initial discussion between advisor(s) and postdocs soon after arriving at WHOI. The goal is to assist the incoming postdoc and their advisor in defining expectations, roles and responsibilities for the postdoctoral period. The document is meant to be a guide, not a checklist, and I am sure there are other important topics that could be discussed. Some of the topics should be periodically re-visited in response to changing circumstances and opportunities. Some of the topics might be appropriate as part of the annual review process, while others are more focused on mentoring.

Ideally, the postdoc and the advisor will have this discussion before the postdoc has their initial meeting with the Assistant Dean of Postdocs, Julie Huber. During that meeting, she will ask if such a conversation has occurred and if it raised any issues that need to be resolved. Together with me, Associate Dean Ann Tarrant, and Postdoc Coordinator Janet Fields, Julie has developed other resources for both postdocs and their advisors, including Action Plans, Alignment Checklists, Communication Practices, and Individual Development Plans (IDP) resources. She will share those materials with you when you meet, but in the meantime, if you find yourself uncertain, please reach out to our office or your Education/Postdoc Coordinator. Julie is now hosting open office hours for postdocs ~every 2 weeks, both in person and on zoom, and I encourage postdocs to stop in, meet Julie, and use her as a resource when needing additional advice, perspective, or resources.

Remember that advisors and postdocs are both working together toward a mutual goal – the postdoc's success. The advisors of postdocs have the responsibility to provide a postdoctoral experience that is fundamentally educational in nature and advances the postdoc's career. The postdoc bears the primary responsibility for the success of their experience, with the support of their advisors, mentors and mentoring committees, and the institution.

Finally, I have taken on conducting exit interviews with as many postdocs as possible to provide myself with the broadest perspective possible on the successes and challenges of the postdoc experience at WHOI. We will be communicating back out to advisors, education coordinators, and/or department chairs if any patterns emerge with respect to issues or challenges that we think APO could help address. Please reach out to me or Julie if you have questions or concerns.



Diane L. Foster
VP for Academic Programs and Dean

Guidelines for Discussing Advisor-Postdoc Expectations

This short document serves as a guide for an initial discussion between a Postdoc and their Advisor(s).

The goal of this discussion is for the Advisor(s) and Postdoc to understand their respective expectations for the postdoctoral period. It should occur within the first month of the appointment and follow-up discussions are encouraged.

Postdocs should also meet with their departmental Education Coordinator and/or Postdoctoral Coordinator. These meetings should occur before the Postdoc is scheduled for the introductory meeting with the Assistant Dean of Postdocs (ADP), which will be held every 3 months via invitation from Academic Programs Office (APO). Advisors and Ed Coordinators, as well as the ADP and Postdoc Coordinator, are resources to help resolve any issues that might develop.

Section 1. Possible Topics to be discussed by the Postdoc with their Advisor(s)

- Set a schedule for regular meetings to discuss progress.
- Determine best mode of communication (email, slack, in person, etc)
- Points of contact within their Department and APO should they have any questions, concerns or issues that require assistance.
- Introductory meetings with other members of the host Department and other Departments and Centers if additional mentors or advisors are desired.
- Source of funding for the postdoc and the responsibilities that accompany it.
- Source of funds for supplies, analytical services, computing, etc.
- Possibilities for extending beyond the time of the initial appointment.
- Options for field work/cruises required/desired for research plan.
- Grant mobility should the postdoc receive a grant as well as issues related to intellectual property and research direction following the postdoc period.
- Possibilities for attending national or international meetings and source of funding.
- Publication and authorship expectations, as well as costs associated with publications, including any costs associated with publishing thesis and other work completed prior to the WHOI postdoc period.
- Attendance at departmental seminars and other seminars (research group, etc.) as appropriate. Timetable for departmental or other seminars.
- Participation in postdoctoral career enhancement activities sponsored by the Academic Programs Office or other groups at WHOI, such as serving on committees, other service, etc.
- Continuation of career development, including applying and interviewing for jobs as appropriate. Prospects/options for a scientific/technical staff appointment at WHOI.

- Formulation of a plan for submitting and/or publishing Ph.D. thesis papers.
- Content of Annual Activity Report (late Fall).
- Other expectations of the postdoc and the advisor.

Section 2. A Good Postdoc Advisor Should:

- In view of the role of the postdoc as a trainee, the advisor should provide mentoring as needed, including not only detailed advice and assistance in the development of a research project, but also education in research issues such as ethics, conflicts of interest, and other skills. If additional mentors or advisors might benefit the postdoc, help the postdoc seek out these individuals.
- Provide guidance for the postdoctoral research project while also encouraging and allowing for increasing independence and freedom to demonstrate capabilities (within funding constraints).
- Advisors should outline the initial expectations about the performance of the postdocs, including the overall research plan and the postdoc's responsibility for ongoing research. These understandings should include laboratory policies on authorship; on ownership of ideas, intellectual property, and data; on determining priority of research projects; and, importantly, on taking projects from the laboratory when the postdoc's term has ended. This should be reviewed on an annual basis.
- Understand the postdoc's expectations for learning new techniques and trying new research directions during their time at WHOI.
- Meet at a regular cadence with the Postdoc to review and assess progress towards expectations and revise as appropriate. Advisors should provide written evaluations of the postdoc's progress at least once a year as part of the annual merit review within each department. Such evaluations provide an assessment and reality check for the postdoc and their advisor.
- Make sure the Postdoc is aware of points of contact and assistance within their Department and APO and who can help them with various issues or concerns that might arise.
- Introduce Postdoc to colleagues at WHOI and elsewhere.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for career enhancement such as:
 - Offer/encourage training in the different strategies and styles for research proposals submitted to various sources of funding and encourage the postdoc to participate on proposals and build collaborations.
 - Give the postdoc an opportunity to comment on manuscripts from the group.
 - Encourage postdocs to review manuscripts and proposals, in parallel with supervisor if appropriate.
 - Encourage postdoc to present papers at national/international meetings; giving constructive feedback about preparations of talk or poster before the meeting; offer constructive feedback about talk or poster presentation at the meeting; introduce postdoc to colleagues at meeting.
 - Make postdoc aware of job opportunities, including at WHOI, and give constructive feedback on job applications, including research & teaching statements, CVs, resumes, and cover letter.