

## PDA Corner: Summary of Meeting with Marc Tessier-Lavigne



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June 2011

The Postdoctoral Association (PDA) recently met with Marc Tessier-Lavigne and members of the Dean's office, Sidney Strickland and Emily Harms. Our first meeting with the new president had two main goals: the first was to inform the new president about the work and scope of the PDA and the second, to discuss some of the most important issues faced by postdocs on campus.

Over the past year, we have been receiving many emails from people who run into problems with housing, benefits, childcare, health insurance, and other issues. We hear a lot of complaints: the rents are too high, there are no retirement plans, and newborns won't get into the Child and Family Center (CFC) for two years because waitlists are so long. All of these issues are important, and we are doing our best to help individuals find solutions and mediate with the administration. When it came to planning our meeting with Dr. Tessier-Lavigne, we realized that if we wanted to make an impact that would help the majority of postdocs, we could bombard him with all of these separate problems. As different as these issues are, they all have one underlying theme in common: an increasing financial hardship for the people concerned. We therefore sought to address the disparate concerns of all postdocs by requesting a reevaluation of postdoc stipends at RU. This issue has been on our minds for a long time, but in light of the difficult financial situation in the recent years, the PDA knew that it had not been an option for negotiations. However, we felt it imperative to raise this issue with Dr. Tessier-Lavigne up-front, so that he would understand the myriad of difficulties of being a postdoc today in New York City for four or five years.

During the Town Hall meeting, Dr. Tessier-Lavigne had already mentioned that the University would implement a 3 percent increase in the salaries for all employees, and a 4.4 percent increase for the students. That was great news, but according to our math, not as effective as we would like to request. The last time Rockefeller postdocs received an increase in their stipends was in 2005-06, when Paul Nurse introduced the concept of salary brackets, which assured that everyone would get paid a set minimum wage, relative to the year of postdoc training that they were in. That was a big step then, but no change has been made to postdoc stipends since. This might not seem so surprising, but when looked at in the context of everything else that has changed during this time period, we realized that the overall financial situation of postdocs did change quite dramatically:

1. Over the past six years, there was an 11.3 percent urban inflation rate. This means that in order to make up for the inflation loss, current salaries would need to be set at approximately \$46K (vs. \$41K current) for the first year and \$56K (vs. \$50K) for maximum earners.
2. Rents have increased 3 percent each year. This has been on top of an effective general rent increase due to the loss of the housing subsidy that was phased out several years ago. While the PDA understands that this subsidy needed to be stopped to keep Rockefeller compliant with IRS laws, we think that the effect of its loss on our earning power needs to be addressed.
3. Rockefeller does not provide a retirement plan, which is even more critical since a 403(b) retirement plan is not open to postdoctoral fellows, leaving many without a pension plan.

Thus, overall, life as a postdoc has become more and more challenging financially, in particular in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Moreover, postdocs' tenures have increased in recent times due to many factors, including the economy.

Our initial encounter with Dr. Tessier-Lavigne was engaging, friendly, and positive. The president was keenly interested in understanding the situation of postdocs on campus and the role of the PDA. He seemed to approve of how scientifically and socially involved our organization was. Dr. Tessier-Lavigne was not aware that we run a monthly Tri-Institutional seminar series, organize the PDA retreat, host two annual campus-wide parties, fund travel fellowships, and support the Biotech Forum and Natural Selections, as well as plan inter-lab BBQs and sporting events. He smiled when he asked if we support hockey games, too.

We came to the meeting prepared, as we had conducted some research into the economics of the salary issue, inflation rates, and purchasing power, etc. to support our arguments. We found the president very open to the conversation and he engaged us in following our analyses. He agreed that over the past ten to twenty years, student

and postdoc trainings have become longer and longer. A postdoc is not a transition period to a more lucrative job anymore, but for most of us it is a substantial period of our professional careers.

We ended this part of our discussion with the understanding that Dr. Tessier-Lavigne will evaluate this issue in depth with various administrative people. We are looking forward to reconvening in July to follow up on this important conversation. While the president is seeking input for the next meeting, we are seeking the same. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any additional comments or ideas that you would like us to bring up.

Aside from the salary negotiations, we also discussed the constant problem of the CFC waitlist. Since October of last year, we have been working with Human Resources and the CFC Director to address this issue, but have not yet reached a conclusion. However, everyone involved—the PDA, Human Resources, and the CFC—is concerned about this issue, and all of us have brought it up to Dr. Tessier-Lavigne. The main problem is that waitlists for infant and toddler care are unacceptably long (a twelve- to twenty-four-month wait). Because postdocs fall into an age bracket that makes them the primary requestors for infant and toddler care, they are the most affected by these waits. Postdocs also fall into a financial bracket in which they cannot afford many other options. The best solution would be an expansion of the CFC, but we were always told that this is not a possibility due to both financial reasons and space limitations. The University is undergoing renovation right now, so we raised this point with Dr. Tessier-Lavigne again and asked him to look into the matter. We also brought up a few ideas, including a “day room,” an apartment for instance, which would be provided by the University, where parents can organize childcare or nanny themselves. Dr. Strickland also mentioned that, about twenty years ago, parents operated a collective kind of enterprise to take care of one another's children. Apparently, that worked beautifully, as people seemed to feel they could trust one another within this community. However, this is a more temporary option. We hope to keep the conversation going so that we can find sustainable long-term solutions. In this PDA initiative, we cannot emphasize enough the need for the support and involvement of parents to make our ideas a reality. All that the PDA can do is to mediate and help put ideas into action.

An unexpected turn in the discussion came when Dr. Tessier-Lavigne inquired about how many of us in the PDA were planning to pursue academic careers. Out of the five of us, two wanted to pursue jobs in academia; two were undecided; and one definitely wanted to leave academia and go into business. These ratios pretty much reflect the situation of postdocs in general. In the United States, approximately 70 percent of postdocs don't pursue academic careers. Unlike a traditional academic institution that emphasizes careers in basic and translational research, our president was very open—and even eager—to try finding ways to support postdocs who want to pursue non-academic careers. He asked, “How do we serve these people well?” We brainstormed about a few ideas, including expanding the biotech workshops, introducing teaching classes, or connecting people to institutions and individuals who might help them in the next steps. He asked us to come up with several proposals, which we will explore during our next meeting. Again, please e-mail us if you have any ideas or suggestions of programs or workshops that we can build to help make the transition from postdoc to non-academic career easier.

The atmosphere at Rockefeller is definitely breathing some fresh air with the new president. The PDA looks forward to staying engaged with Dr. Tessier-Lavigne and with the administration to explore new possibilities that will ultimately help all of us.

## Comments

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