

PDA corner: Meeting with the President



By Isabel Kurth

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In early August, the PDA met with our new president Marc Tessier-Lavigne; Vice President for Educational Affairs and Dean of Graduate and Post Graduate Studies and Research Professor Sid Strickland, and Emily Harms from the Dean's Office, as well as Virginia Huffman from Human Resources (HR). On our agenda were three important issues:

1. Salary negotiations
2. Waitlist for Child and Family Center (CFC)
3. Career planning

This meeting was a follow-up on a first meeting that we had in April, where we gave the president an overview of the activities of the PDA and most importantly informed him about the most relevant issues that affect postdoc life here at Rockefeller University (RU). Over the years, we heard many concerns about how high rents have become, how we don't have any retirement plans, how waitlists for the CFC are too long, etc. All of these issues are important, but, at the root of it all, everyone is experiencing hardships. To address this, the PDA examined the current state of compensation at RU.

The last time the stipends were increased was in 2005-2006, when former President Paul Nurse introduced the concept of salary brackets, which assured that everyone would get paid a set minimum wage relative to their year of postdoc training. That was a big step then, but no change has been made to postdoc stipends since. However, the situation of postdocs has changed quite significantly over the past six years. Postdoc tenures have increased to over five years, up from four years in 2006. Additionally, rents in Rockefeller housing have been constantly increasing, while housing subsidies were eliminated in 2008. Most importantly, the urban inflation rate since 2006 has been 11.3%. This means that in order to make up for the inflation loss, current salaries would need to be set at approximately \$46k (vs. \$41k currently) for the first year and \$56k (vs. \$50k) for maximum earners. By way of comparison, salaries range from \$46,000-\$50,000 for competitive fellowships (Helen Hay, LSRF), \$43,000-51,000 + benefits for some universities (Broad, Stanford, Whitehead) and \$45,000 for NSF for 0-1 year postdocs. Starting salaries for industry postdocs is ~\$55,000 and comes with life insurance and 401k options. Also, the NIH has recently increased postdoc stipends for 2011 by 2% to \$38,496 with retroactive adjustments.

In light of this situation, our primary goal for the first meeting in April was to bring these issues to the attention of the administration and negotiate a salary increase for postdocs. Our request fell on open ears as the president agreed to look into this matter and get back to us with a better idea of what might be possible given the current financial environment. In our more recent meeting, Dr. Tessier-Lavigne announced that he is committed to institutionalizing a salary increase by January 2012 on a voluntary basis, and by July 1, 2012 on a mandatory basis. The fiscal year has just begun; mandatory changes cannot be made until the beginning of the following year in July 2012. The amount of the salary increase hasn't been established yet. However, Dr. Tessier-Lavigne and the administration have been studying the marketplace and the faculty needs to be engaged to develop the proposal and make a final decision. Meetings with Faculty will be held in the fall of 2011, and final details should be worked through with the Academic Council at that time. Dr. Tessier-Lavigne assured us that the PDA will be informed when it comes time to finalizing the decision. We also discussed benefits, including life insurance, retirement and disability plans, which are a constant concern for postdocs as well as for other employees campus-wide. "We hear you, and guarantee we will look into this matter," commented Marc Tessier-Lavigne. Given the budgetary ramifications of these issues, they would have to be considered in the context of the strategic plan for 2012, with the goal to come up with possible ideas in May 2012.

Regarding other matters, we were very pleased to hear that our concerns about the CFC waitlist had been well received. Virginia Huffman, in collaboration with Alex Kogan from the Housing Department, has spearheaded an effort to look into options of how to expand childcare to relieve the long (6-18 months) waitlist for infants and toddlers. RU is currently looking into a new space in the vicinity of the campus in which to install a new CFC. The most likely scenario is that this new CFC would be for younger children exclusively (3 to 32 months old). One possibility currently being explored is to share this center with the other members of the Tri-Institution; MSKCC and Cornell. According to Virginia Huffman, there are still lots of obstacles. In particular, they need to wait for agreement from the other institutions before taking the next steps. "We think it's a problem and we would like to find solutions," Virginia Huffman

stated.

Finally, we recently performed a survey to understand the biggest challenges for postdocs when it comes to finding jobs. Interestingly, more than 90% of postdocs at Rockefeller would like to pursue a tenure track position at a primary research organization. However, only 35% of postdocs who left Rockefeller in the past year ended up with such a position—which is close to the national average; and 20% have gone on to a second postdoc. Thus, many postdocs wish to receive additional mentorship to help them prepare for the job searches, something that only 25% receive from their current PIs.

A primary consensus from postdocs was the request for a career office on campus. MSKCC has recently started one, and Columbia University has had a successful career office in place for many years. Rockefeller is currently not a preferred hiring spot for any consulting, pharmaceutical, or biotech company, which have hired 19% of postdocs who left in the past year; a career office could greatly improve this situation. Another idea discussed was that of developing an alumni outreach network. The current postdoc alumni database is ineffective, and valuable mentorship from postdoc alumni is not being tapped into. This could initially be set up in conjunction with the career office. We will meet again at the end of the month with the Dean's Office and HR to discuss these possibilities in more detail. We will keep you posted!

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