



Keeping the Value in Education Part 2: Postdoctoral Training

Interview with Joan F. Lorden, Ph.D. – May 2002

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Interviewer: Your article in *Change* magazine calls postdoctoral education a medieval system based on the apprenticeship model. What have you done to bring it out of the dark ages at the University of Alabama at Birmingham?

Lorden: We established standards for appointment and benefits like any employment category – sick leave, health insurance, etc. – all designed specifically for the situation of postdocs and their families.

Interviewer: What would you say is your biggest accomplishment to date?

Lorden: Establishing a central office in the graduate school. Postdocs know where to go if they have a concern, and this put someone in charge of their welfare. It is especially helpful for international trainees to make themselves heard. Establishing an office is an important step for the institution. It gives permanence to the notion of a trainee support system. Because of this office at UAB, we have been able to launch university-wide programs that benefit everyone, including the faculty. We established the Career Enhancement Awards to give postdocs travel funds for visiting other labs and attending conferences. Faculty appreciate having support for professional development. We are about to make the first Cottrell Career Enhancement Awards. This prestigious award will add \$16,000 to the stipend provided by the academic department, and it includes professional development travel funds. This kind of package can make a difference for faculty who are trying to recruit top scholars for their projects.

Interviewer: Traditionally, faculty manage their own labs, and this includes their trainees. How have the faculty at UAB reacted to your directives?

Lorden: We do require the faculty to use a standardized letter of appointment for their postdocs and we keep a central database. The employment policies are standardized. But you'd be surprised how much good will we've gained by creating competitive award programs.

Interviewer: Do you believe you are better able to recruit good postdocs?

Lorden: It may be too early to tell, but what has surprised me is the way our program helps recruit faculty. They can see it gives postdocs a role and voice on our campus. Our training program has an edge that others don't. We've received especially positive feedback about the Postdoctoral Visiting Scholar program. The postdocs are in charge of organizing it. They select the visiting scientists and put together the colloquia. In terms of concrete outcomes, that will be hard to assess for another 5-10 years. We established the UAB Office of Postdoctoral Education in 1998. Right now we are treading on new ground and the most important thing to do is listen.

Interviewer: Who else is doing this?

Lorden: It's been a grassroots movement. Around the country, postdocs have formed their own local associations to ask for support services. Some have posted web sites at institutions that don't have an administrative office but do have an association. Not everyone has figured it out, but sometimes an office has evolved because postdocs are organized on that campus. The University of Pennsylvania and the University of California at San Francisco have large numbers of postdocs, and as institutions, they've been doing good things. They started before we did at UAB and we were able to learn from them. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation recently funded a national forum for postdocs and for institutions that want to provide coordinated services. The Postdoc Network is an online magazine and database posted by Sciences' Next Wave. It advises postdocs about how to manage their career, ways to use their degree, how to write a grant, etc. It also shares information about steps some institutions have taken.

Interviewer: What is your best tip for other universities that want to get started?

Lorden: It is important to listen to the postdocs. It is also important to involve the faculty because they are the ones who provide the training. Even if the top administration leads the effort to improve postdoctoral training, dialogue is still necessary. At UAB, we are spending a lot of time getting to know the postdocs on our campus and creating opportunities to bring them together.

Interviewer: What do postdocs most often ask for?

Lorden: Affordable child care on campus. Their salaries are limited and they work long hours. These are the childbearing years for many of them, so they must somehow manage to do it all.

Interviewer: What do you think is the most important service you've given postdocs on your campus?

Lorden: I'd say access to broader career development. The Postdoctoral Enhancement Awards give postdocs an opportunity to compete for funds to do the things they feel are important to their careers. The Postdoctoral Visiting Scholar program is designed to give

them exposure to senior scientists of their choice. Our career development workshops for graduate students and postdocs have also been well received. Academic positions can take many different forms and Ph.D.'s have career options in government and industry. Generally postdocs only observe faculty at large institutions where research and teaching are the job duties. In our workshops, we introduce them to professionals from all walks of life. They see what it is like to be a Ph.D. in a clinical department where the priority is direct services to clients. They also meet professors from small liberal arts colleges where teaching is the focus and research is done with undergraduates. Our strategy is to attract the best and brightest by opening up possibilities for their careers in government, industry, and academia. By treating postdocs with respect while they are with us, we hope that many of them will choose to stay in academia and they will be well prepared for productive careers.

Interview with Dr. Joan Lorden by Joy Simpson, a member of the National Association of Science Writers. Dr. Lorden is currently the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

References

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