Postdoctoral Fellowships – What, Why, and How

I am often impressed with the wide variety of available postdoctoral positions. But while applying for postdoctoral fellowships is quite common in some fields, students in other fields often overlook the possibility of a postdoc. Through an email conversation with Logan Ahlstrom, a recent UA graduate in Chemistry who currently holds a postdoc at the University of Michigan Department of Chemistry, and some cursory internet search, I came up with a few reasons to pursue postdoctoral funding and some suggestions about how to go about the process.

The following is only intended to be a rough introduction to get you thinking about postdoctoral funding; please talk to your professors and others in your field for more precise information.

What is a postdoc?

According to www.nationalpostdoc.org, an excellent resource by the way, a postdoctoral scholar is "an individual holding a doctoral degree who is engaged in a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of his or her choosing" (http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/policy-22/what-is-a-postdoc).

A postdoc is primarily for you, a finite period of time to further develop your knowledge and skill base.

Ideally, a postdoc will find his or her own funding from, for example, NIH or NSF, and take that funding to the institution that is most appropriate to the research. However, many positions are created when a researcher receives a grant and needs help with the research. Other positions are funded through a university or a department within a university.

Why pursue a postdoc?

As Logan points out, while a postdoc does fund you for a few years, it also demonstrates to potential employers that you can compete for future grants. He lists the following as reasons that the search for a postdoc was valuable to him:

1) As a young researcher at the junction of my graduate and postdoc studies, it forced me sit down and logically and practically piece together my thoughts about how to start looking into the scientific questions that make me tick.
2) It showed my postdoc advisor – and even my Ph.D. advisor – that I am serious about wanting to advance my career.
3) Drafting and submitting a proposal before I started my postdoc gave me a jumpstart on my postdoc research, as I had already thoroughly identified a problem to work on and had familiarized myself with the literature and the methods that I wanted to use.

How does one find a postdoc?

The search for postdoc funding is similar to the search for most funding.

· Begin by talking with people. Talk to professors and researchers in your department and in other institutions. Talk to postdoctoral scholars in your field. Unlike some other types of funding, postdoc funds are not always advertised. If you know of someone who is doing work that interests you and has funds to do it, ask that person about a postdoc position.

· Search websites and databases. Pivot and Grantforward, databases that are both available to UA students through our library, always have lists of open postdoc positions. Professional association job lists and other job lists usually include postdoc opportunities. The National Postdoctoral Association links to AAAS Science Careers/Jobs which lists Postdoc jobs at: http://jobs.sciencecareers.org/

· The UA Postdoctoral Resource Network contains UA policies for postdocs and access to the National Postdoctoral Association. http://grad.arizona.edu/financial-resources/postdoctoral-center/about-us

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