

New Office Provides Professional Development, Social Connections for Postdocs at UA

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Postdoctoral scholars find themselves in a category of their own.

They're not faculty, students or staff, and their job titles can be "postdoctoral research associate," "research scientist" or a number of other labels.

The UA employs nearly 500 postdoctoral scholars recruited from institutions around the country and abroad. These scholars come eager to continue their research and learn new skills from their faculty mentors, but they often arrive in Tucson alone and with few institutional connections.

At least that was the case until **Jenny Hoit** ^[1] got involved. Hoit, a professor of speech, language, and hearing sciences, has spearheaded the creation of **Postdoctoral Affairs** ^[2], a new office that provides professional development resources and an inclusive community for postdocs.

Hoit, the director of Postdoctoral Affairs, called upon her own experience as a postdoc when she set out to improve resources for those at the UA.

Fresh from earning her own doctorate in 1986 right here at the UA, Hoit accepted a postdoc position at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Looking back years later, she acknowledges that her time at Harvard was wonderful, but admits she often felt isolated and disconnected from the bustling activities of graduate students and faculty.

"I had no cohort or organization through which I could find like-minded friends," Hoit said. "It could be quite lonely at times."

After she returned to Tucson, Hoit joined the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences and realized there was no organization for postdocs at the UA. So, she took matters into her own hands.

Her first step was to create a course called Survival Skills and Ethics, designed for graduate students and also offered to postdocs. But immediately, she faced a roadblock: how to find the postdocs to let them know about the course.

She began asking around campus and quickly realized that not only did postdocs not exist as a category in some systems she could access, but they were hard to find in databases because their job titles were all different.

Something needed to be done, Hoit thought.

In 2016, Hoit had the opportunity to serve as interim director of the **Graduate Center** ^[3], a unit

that supports the Graduate College by providing its students and postdocs with resources and opportunities for professional development and research collaboration. But the center, which had been around only two years at the time, was busy serving the thousands of graduate students on campus. So, Hoit wrote a proposal outlining her vision of a separate **postdoctoral affairs office** [2] that could collaborate with the Graduate Center. She gave it to the vice president for research, who told her, 'We need to do this, and you need to spearhead it.'

"And that's when it all got started," Hoit said, adding that the office now has its own building, at 1600 E. First St., a website with an events calendar, support from the Office of Research, Discovery and Innovation and the Graduate College, and a good working relationship with the Graduate Center. The Division of Human Resources now sends Hoit notices of new postdoctoral hires so she can send them welcome letters and walk them through an orientation process.

Postdocs are an integral part of the research enterprise, Hoit said.

"We're a Research I university and the work postdocs do contributes significantly to that status," she added. "Not only that, but because they spend so much time in labs, they're mentoring graduate and undergraduate students and often providing a bridge between students and senior faculty."

The office also has its own lounge, plus a classroom it shares with the Graduate Center and the Graduate College. And now that she has her own office, Hoit is able to offer professional development panels and workshops as well as networking opportunities. She also encouraged postdocs to start their own organization ? the **University of Arizona Postdoctoral Association** [4].

Keaton Wilson has been the major force behind the formation and development of UAPA. Although his doctorate ? in organismal biology, ecology and evolution ? is from University of Montana in Missoula, his research was done in Southern Arizona. So he was happy to find a postdoctoral home at the UA, and to help Hoit in her efforts to build a postdoc community.

"I went to a meeting Jenny organized and was immediately impressed by how enthusiastic and engaged she was," Wilson says. "It certainly rubbed off on me."

Along with other postdocs, Wilson helped establish UAPA and has encouraged other colleagues to get involved, whether by attending professional development workshops or hanging out together at social networking opportunities.

"One of the most important things we've done is to develop the **Postdoctoral Handbook** [5] that can be downloaded and that helps newcomers ? especially those from international institutions ? navigate our health care system, our tax system, learn where to find funding, and so on," Wilson said. "It's a living document that's constantly being updated."

UAPA and Postdoctoral Affairs also are helping prepare postdocs for what comes next. According to Wilson, the job market has changed significantly in the last 10 years, and the chance of getting a pure research position in a Research I institution is quite low. Further, many researchers are expected to teach, though few are trained for the classroom.

"Postdocs are changing their expectations, and many are looking at positions in industry or at colleges and universities that place more emphasis on teaching than pure research," Wilson

says. "And many expect to do more than one postdoc."

As a microbiologist studying microbial functions in low-nutrient arid and semi-arid soil systems, postdoc **Priyanka Kushwaha** works with professor **Raina Maier** in the **Department of Soil, Water and Environmental Science** [6]. She says many postdocs consider completing more than one postdoctoral fellowship.

"Some postdocs do it to work in a different lab in a new location and some do it to build research and marketable skills," Kushwaha said. "Either way, (completing) more than one postdoc is becoming more common."

Whether arriving for your first postdoc or your fifth, getting started in a new city can be daunting.

"Knowing there's a welcoming group to help you learn about your new community ? housing, transportation, neighborhoods, even where to buy groceries ? is so helpful," Kushwaha says. "The workshops and panel discussions on CVs and resumes, on interviewing and negotiating contracts, are important to all of us, but the social aspect is important, too."

It can be hard working a lot of hours and not being in school, she says.

"You arrive in a new place, and where do you find your friends?" she said. "UAPA, Jenny and the Postdoctoral Affairs office have made it so much easier to find a community full of people who are going through the same experiences. It's made such a difference, and I hope as more postdocs learn about what we're doing, more will get involved."

To learn more, visit the Postdoctoral Affairs [website](#) [2] or email postdocs@email.arizona.edu [7].

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Links

[1] <http://slhs.arizona.edu/people/jeannette-hoit-phd-ccc-slp>

[2] <https://postdoc.arizona.edu/>

[3] <https://gradcenter.arizona.edu/home>

[4] <http://uapostdocs.weebly.com/>

[5] http://uapostdocs.weebly.com/uploads/6/2/3/3/62332767/postdoctoral_handbook_guide_version_1.pdf

[6] <https://swes.cals.arizona.edu/>

[7] <mailto:postdocs@email.arizona.edu>