



A Forgotten Class of Scientists: Examining the Parental and Family Benefits Available to Research Trainees

Executive Summary by the FDP Task Force on Parental and Family Leave for Research Trainees

Our nation's scientific progress relies upon a cadre of developing scientists and engineers at academic institutions, federal agencies, and private organizations across the country who fills critical roles in the research workforce. To further their careers, these research trainees rely on temporary placements — pre- and postdoctoral appointments — that do not consistently offer support and benefits afforded other researchers, including adequate parental and family leave. Trainees' benefits sometimes slip through the cracks between the federal funding agency and their academic institution of residence. This fragmented system contributes to a common perception that a research career is incompatible with having a family, further eroding the critical scientific workforce, particularly women.

The Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP) Task Force on Parental and Family Leave for Research Trainees examined the status of federal and university policies related to parental and family leave for predoctoral and postdoctoral research trainees. These findings are particularly important in light of a recently-announced National Science Foundation Career-Life Balance Initiative to provide greater work-related flexibility to women and men in research careers. The Task Force is a cooperative initiative of individuals from research universities and non-profits working collaboratively with federal agency officials to explore broadly adopted policies and procedures that promote a healthy and effective research infrastructure. To this end, this Task Force report:

- (1) Reviewed existing federal regulations and policies related to parental and family leave benefits;
- (2) Described the issues impacting parental and family leave benefits for research trainees;
- (3) Examined how academic institutions interpret policies with regard to predoctoral and postdoctoral research trainees and family and medical leave; and
- (4) Articulated a series of potential next steps, including compiling recommendations from Federal agencies, researchers, academic institutions, and policy analysts to improve the implementation of family and medical leave for research trainees.

Background

Protecting employees from various forms of discrimination is an important role of federal and state governments. The potential impact of pregnancy and parenting on career development has been a focal point of legal scholars and lawmakers since the late 1960s, resulting in a series of laws and regulations, including the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, Title IX, and the Office of Management and Budget Circular A-21. Family-friendly policies and benefits — including paid parental leave, short-term disability leave, unpaid extended family leave supported by the Family and Medical Leave Act, and paid or subsidized childcare — are becoming more commonplace across the U.S. Unfortunately for research trainees, however, receiving parental or family leave benefits is uncommon. According to researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, the paid maternity leave for academic populations at Association of American Universities member institutions, only 23 percent of postdoctoral researchers were entitled to at least six weeks of paid leave following childbirth. Only 13 percent of academic institutions offered paid leave to graduate researchers and some academic institutions had an institutional cap on the number of individuals who could receive paid leave at a given academic institution.

Straddling the Divide

Determining parental and family leave policies for any given research trainee can be a complicated dance between institutional policies and those required or allowed by funding agencies. There are three primary,

interdependent factors in determining the benefits available: (1) the source of funding (individual training grants, institutional training grants, or research grants to their mentors, which have different implications for employee status and benefits); (2) the policies and benefits structure at their academic institution, that can sometimes result in postdoctoral researchers working side by side performing the same duties but with different benefits; and (3) the particular circumstances of the research trainee, including what they need, where they are in their career, and the research they are doing. The ranges in benefits include: fixed versus accrued sick leave, leaves of absence or accommodation, withdrawal and re-entry programs, and dependent care/childcare.

Steps Forward

Several efforts are underway to improve the situation for research trainees. The National Postdoctoral Association held a summit in 2010 addressing the postdoctoral stage of women's careers, the National Science Foundation Career-Life Balance Initiative was recently launched with a ten-year plan to provide greater flexibility to men and women in research careers, and the NIH Working Group on Women in Biomedical Careers addresses issues related to the entry, retention, and sustained advancement of women in all levels of scientific careers. At academic institutions across the nation, many people are working to better the experience for research trainees, and to assist them, their supervisors, and the various departments in navigating this complicated landscape. In many cases, task forces are forming, FAQs and policy papers are being written, and outreach is underway to inform faculty and research trainees of existing policies and options. In at least one case, postdoctoral researchers are banding together to make change. At the University of California, postdoctoral researchers successfully formed a union and ratified their first contract in 2010 to address hours, benefits, and wages.

This Task Force report describes findings from FDP member institution representatives and data from prior reports to provide a consolidated summary of recommendations for the equitable treatment of postdoctoral researchers and employees with regard to parental and family leave. These recommendations include calls for (1) collaboration and partnerships; (2) further research into existing and efficacious programs and their costs; (3) policy reform, including a minimum baseline for all research trainees; (4) institutional climate change and support, including transparency, zero tolerance for discrimination, and mentoring programs; and (5) increased outreach and dissemination of clear policies at academic institutions and federal agencies.

The FDP and the Task Force on Parental and Family Leave for Research Trainees recognizes and joins the efforts made across the nation to support change to the existing systems and policies for research trainees in general, and with respect to family and parental leave policies.

The full copy of the report is available at: [www.thefdp.org].

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