

CHAPTER SEVEN POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS

The most nebulous status in academia is that of the ‘postdoc.’ For some, it is a wonderful opportunity to prepare for a career in academia or public history, get a strong foothold on a new research project and expand research networks. For others, it represents a painful transition at the end of the training period and is characterized by uncertainty, financial burdens, emotional distress, and dislocation. Since very few postdoctoral fellowships are available each year, postdocs have become the silent minority of the academic world. One thing is for certain the benefits of a postdoc rely almost entirely on how you use it. When you use the time wisely, the payoff will be enormous – you can kick-start your scholarly career.

What is a Postdoc?

Postdoctoral fellowships are research grants designed to enhance the training of people with recently completed PhDs. Some fellowships, particularly outside Canada, are for teaching. Certain museums, such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization, also offer fellowships, although the latter are rare. SSHRC has identified five objectives for postdoctoral fellows (defined as individuals who have finished a PhD within the past three years): to undertake original research; publish research findings; develop and expand personal research networks; broaden teaching experience; and prepare to become competitive in national research grants competitions. The amount of funding provided for a postdoctoral fellowship varies depending on the source; in most cases it is a great deal more than graduate funding or a sessional salary, but less than a starting assistant professor or lecturer would earn. In applying for a postdoc, applicants are expected to establish a new research agenda that is distinct from their doctoral work. However, to make the case that the research agenda is viable, it helps to show how the new project grows out of the doctoral project.

One professor described postdoctoral fellowships as “the great sham of academia.” He meant that, despite impressive claims to beginning exciting new research projects, many postdocs do little more than turn their dissertation into a book. Of course, many history postdocs are new PhDs who are active on the job market, and they are understandably anxious to produce a book. In today’s competitive academic marketplace, publishing one or two articles and making concrete progress toward turning the thesis into a book are important steps to getting short-listed for a tenure-track position, and everyone understands that a postdoc will dedicate some of her/his time to publishing. Still, a postdoctoral fellowship is a rare opportunity to begin a new project before having to deal with the rigours of a full-time position.

Securing a postdoctoral fellowship should be considered a great accomplishment; you will be highly regarded by hiring committees. With few teaching or administrative responsibilities, postdocs enjoy enormous freedom. Many postdocs will teach during the tenure of their fellowship, although in most cases the granting agency restricts the amount of time a fellow can dedicate to teaching. If you have never taught before, you can use the period of the fellowship to gain some teaching experience. Some institutions will hire you to teach one course or provide

you with a contractually limited appointment to complement the fellowship. If you are concerned that you have never taught an introductory-level survey course, this may be a good time to start. In fact you might ask the department chair to observe your class and write a letter in support of your teaching abilities. Teaching a survey course will be a great deal more time-consuming than teaching a senior-level seminar in your field of expertise, but it may save you time and stress down the road.

Why do a Postdoc?

There is a lot of mystery surrounding the postdoc experience. After many years at one school, some people are daunted by the prospect of relocating to another university in another city or across the country, and having to move again a year or two later. Friendships may be difficult to form when you are neither a graduate student nor a full-time professor. Not all fellowships provide generous remuneration, and many postdocs face financial constraints.

The most difficult aspect of being a postdoc is determining where you belong. You are no longer a graduate student, but neither are you a full member of the faculty. Some institutions will hire you to teach a course, but without a full-time appointment you may feel isolated within the department. Some universities simply do not know what to do with a postdoc. The sense of dislocation some postdocs feel is exacerbated by the fact that they may not have access to internal research funding or professional development funds, may not be members of the union or faculty association, may have limited access to health, dental or pension benefits (or other benefits, such as campus athletic facilities), and sometimes have limited office space with poor equipment. You may attend departmental meetings regularly, but be asked to leave when colleagues turn to an issue (such as hiring) on which discussion is limited to permanent faculty. Some postdocs avoid departmental meetings in order to avoid being singled out in this manner. Many postdocs also feel the frustration of their ambiguous status in the wider professional community. Postdocs have to be proactive in seeking out opportunities and developing collegial relationships in a larger research community.

Postdoctoral fellowships also come with many benefits. Obviously, the greatest benefit of a postdoc is that it can facilitate your research agenda. You can use the time to produce articles, make concrete progress on a book manuscript, or begin a new project and set the stage for your future work. A starting professor faces numerous challenges, and the demands on their time for administrative work and teaching are enormous. If, like the majority of postdocs, you have not yet secured a permanent position, you will also use the period of your fellowship to apply for jobs. In most cases you will have a host who follows your progress and acts as a mentor, and may also be willing to write a letter of reference. You might ask the department to host a research talk. This is not only a good opportunity to share your work with your new colleagues, but offers valuable experience for a job talk. The period of your postdoctoral fellowship is also a good time to become involved in a professional association. The Canadian Historical Association, l'Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française, and many other organizations welcome volunteers to help co-ordinate meetings, organize advocacy campaigns or run for election to their

governing councils.

As a postdoc, you should not shy away from applying for research grants. Although most universities do not permit postdocs to apply for internal funding, SSHRC encourages postdocs to apply for Standard Research Grants and, in fact, sets aside funding for new scholars. SSHRC also allows postdocs to apply for workshop or conference grants. Organizing workshops/conferences can be very time-consuming, and your tenure as a postdoc may be a good opportunity to hone these skills early in your career. None of this is inconsistent with the mandate of a postdoctoral fellowship. In addition to research, postdocs are encouraged to become more competitive in applying for future grants.

Funding Opportunities

The largest source of postdoctoral fellowships for Canadian citizens in the social sciences and humanities is SSHRC. Each year SSHRC awards dozens of postdoctoral fellowships. The Killam Foundation has also provided funding for postdocs at five institutions across Canada: Dalhousie University, McGill University, University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, and University of Calgary. Killam fellowships offer more remuneration and are extremely competitive. Dozens of other universities also provide postdoctoral fellowships to attract new scholars. Other institutions provide non-stipendiary fellowships. In this case, the university provides a postdoc with an office and other resources if they have external funding. Postdoctoral fellowships are also available outside Canada. The Australian Research Council, for instance, has an open competition each year for fellowships (albeit with a preference for Australian citizens). The Canada-US Fulbright Program provides grants to Canadian postdocs for up to one year at an American institution. Hundreds of universities, foundations, non-governmental organizations and governments across the world provide postdoctoral fellowships. The criteria for evaluating an application depends on the agency, but generally includes: academic accomplishments (awards, fellowships, scholarships, distinctions); previous research experience and publications; duration of your doctoral studies; originality and significance of your proposed program of work; assessments from referees; and appropriateness of place of tenure (usually based on the university or department nomination form).

Most universities have a research office with people who can answer questions about crafting the best possible grant application. In this regard, the advice of Rosemary Ommer (VP Research Office, University of Victoria), is especially useful: “The grants officer [SSHRC] is your friend. It's surprising how few people know that. Grants officers at SSHRC do not judge applications ... their job is to make sure that there are no technical errors that could disqualify you. They will be happy to answer any query, and to send a query on ‘up the line’ if they can't deal with the matter themselves. That's their job.”

If you are interested in beginning a postdoc soon after completing your PhD, it is essential that you plan in advance. The deadline for SSHRC, Fulbright, and Killam fellowships, for example, are in October and November. Awards begin the following May. You need a great deal of time

to construct a competitive application and solicit an institution to host your tenure. Be prepared to spend weeks, if not months, preparing an application and soliciting feedback from colleagues with experience applying for grants.

Choosing a Host Institution

Choosing the appropriate institution and/or a good host is critical to the postdoc experience. SSHRC, Killam, and most other fellowships do not permit award holders to remain at the institutions where they completed their PhD. Fellowships associated with a specific university also generally refuse to allow their own graduates to apply for the award.

Many postdocs look abroad. This is a good opportunity to expand your horizons and look at your research from a new perspective. Applicants with international experience are also attractive candidates to potential employers. This is even true for Canadianists; no matter what your field of study, international experience can be a source of inspiration and help you establish a larger network of colleagues early in your career.

A host institution should provide postdocs with all the resources (library access, email account, mailbox, etc.) available to faculty members. External agencies such as SSHRC and Fulbright insist that the host institution provide the candidate with proper resources for conducting research before they will provide funding. Office space is especially important if you want to fully integrate into a department, but be aware that some institutions simply do not have additional office space to offer. Most funding agencies also require an individual at the institution to host your research. Hosts are not a supervisor; they will not evaluate your work or micro-manage your research. But a good host can help you get oriented on campus, dispense useful advice about the publication process and job applications, and possibly provide a reference letter.

A postdoctoral fellowship facilitates the beginning of a new research program, publishing original research and entering the job market. Consider your long-term objectives and the academic trajectory of a postdoctoral fellowship. In choosing a host institution, consider the whole of its intellectual resources and communities – research institutes or centres, guest speakers or visiting scholars, teaching and learning centres, interdisciplinary programs, research clusters, and international linkages all enhance the research capacity of a university. Enjoy your time!