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Inside this Issue

- 1 Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Receives 2009 NPA Distinguished Service Award
New Scientists Without Borders Organization Gains Momentum
- 3 Science Net Watch: Web 2.0 Science Communities Slowly Emerge Online
- 4 Preview of the Upcoming NPA Annual Meeting in Houston
NPA Meeting Round-Up
- 5 PRO/UAW Negotiations with the University of California Move Forward
NPA Member Round-Up
- 6 AAAS/Science Careers to Launch New Diversity Portal
- 7 New NPA International Officers Focus on Advancing International Postdoc Issues
- 8 Postdocs Must Acquire Career Advocacy Skills
- 9 Careering through Your Postdoc, Part IV
- 10 Postdocs and the Federal Income Contributions Act (FICA) Tax
- 11 Global Recruiting at the 13th European Career Fair
- 12 What is the Visa Backlog and How Will it Affect You?
- 13 Policy Point
News

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The POSTDOCKET

The Official Newsletter of the National Postdoctoral Association

Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Receives 2009 NPA Distinguished Service Award

Cathee Johnson Phillips



The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) will confer the 2009 Distinguished Service Award upon the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation at its

Annual Meeting, to be held March 27-29 in Houston, Texas. Michael Teitelbaum, PhD, Sloan Foundation Program Director, will accept the Award on behalf of the foundation.

“The feeling among NPA members and leadership is overwhelmingly one of gratitude and appreciation for the leadership contribution that the Sloan Foundation has made in support of postdoctoral

scholars,” said Stacy Gelhaus, PhD, Chair of the NPA Board of Directors. “Conferring the 2009 Distinguished Service Award upon the Sloan Foundation is, quite simply, NPA’s way of saying thank you to the Foundation.”

The Sloan Foundation was established in 1934 by Alfred Pritchard Sloan, Jr., who was then President and CEO of General Motors (GM), and later became Chair of the GM Board. The Foundation focuses on “science, technology, and economic institutions—and the scholars and practitioners who work in these fields” and recognizes that these groups are “chief drivers of the nation’s health and prosperity.”

Sloan, continued on page 2

New Scientists Without Borders Organization Gains Momentum

Angela Kindig

In May 2008, the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS), in conjunction with the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World, the Pasteur Institute, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, the Earth Institute, the African Centre for Technology Studies and others, launched a new online networking organization called *Scientists Without Borders*. By connecting scientists from across the globe with one another, *Scientists Without Borders* aims to improve quality of life in the developing

world through science-based activities. Originally co-conceived by NYAS and the United Nations (U.N.) Millennium Campaign, the pharmaceutical company, Merck & Co., Inc., was the initiative’s



Evelyn Strauss, PhD, is the Executive Director of Scientists Without Borders

founding supporter. The keystone of this new initiative is a web-based “matching” database allowing organizations, projects or individuals requiring specific technical expertise and scientific resources are able to connect with others offering such skills. *Scientists Without Borders* aims to

Scientists, continued on page 2

Scientists, continued from page 1

address some of the world's most urgent community, environmental, agricultural and health problems by boosting basic science research and its applications in developing countries, thereby achieving specific goals established by the U.N. Millennium Campaign.

Currently, scientists and organizations work individually across many countries and disciplines to solve specific challenges, and collaborations are often hampered by a lack of communication and technology in developing nations. Evelyn Strauss, Executive Director of Scientists Without Borders, explains, "Organizations working in the developing world don't necessarily know what one another are doing in part because there's no mechanism for sharing that information." Scientists Without Borders seeks to enhance the achievements of these researchers and agencies by allowing them to become better connect-

ed, fostering interdisciplinary alliances and pooling resources, thereby enabling mutual benefits from each other's success, knowledge and resources.

Individuals, projects, and organizations register on the Web site, create a profile and indicate what resources they are able to offer; similarly, individuals, projects,



or organizations detail needed resources and technical expertise. Website users can search by organization or project name, individual, topic, geographical region or area of expertise. Users can offer their services and material resources or look for a potential match to meet their particular needs. People at any level and in any discipline can register, and most positions are

voluntary. A quick search of the Web site reveals opportunities for individuals to serve as instructors, translators, lab technicians, counselors or provide equipment and equipment training for organizations in developing countries. Additionally, there is potential for mutually productive collaborations—scientists can request patient samples and specimens from specific global regions.

Already the Scientists Without Borders Web site has facilitated several successful matches. Dr. Karen Duca from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana invited an immunologist to teach for one semester in her department. The university benefited from her expertise and materials she developed that remained after she left.

Angela Kindig, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

Sloan, continued from page 1

The Sloan Foundation was instrumental in the founding of the NPA and provided the funding that helped establish the organization. As a long-time supporter of scientific research, the Foundation recognized the need for a national membership organization that would provide a voice for postdoctoral scholars.

The following quote from one of the nominations for the Foundation encapsulates the spirit of the award: "The NPA's Distinguished Service Award should be given to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation not in recognition of philanthropic generosity but more importantly for its vision that recognized and continues to address the national need to improve the postdoctoral training experience. It is time that the founding entity [of the NPA] is recognized for its foresight and dedicated action."

Most recently, the Sloan Foundation supported NPA's Survey Planning Project as well as the Postdoc Leadership Mentoring Project (PLMP). The PLMP benefited 26 institutions across the United States and fostered the formation and maintenance of active post-

doctoral associations and postdoctoral offices through team visits, mentoring, and other activities.

Members of the Nominating Committee were: Walter Goldschmidts, PhD, Cold Spring Harbor Lab; Laurel Haak, PhD, Discovery Logic; Victoria McGovern, PhD, Burroughs Wellcome Fund; and, Joel Oppenheim, PhD, New York University Medical School. Members of the Awards Subcommittee were: Lisa Kozlowski, PhD, Chair, Thomas Jefferson University; Alan Dorval, PhD, Duke University; Shawn McClintock, PhD, University of Missouri; Caroline Rondi, Brigham and Women's Hospital; and Andreas Sandgren, PhD, Harvard School of Public Health.

Past recipients:

- 2004: Ruth Kirschstein, M.D., Senior Advisor to the Director, National Institutes of Health
- 2005: National Academies' Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy
- 2006: Laurel L. Haak, PhD, Science Director, Discovery Logics
- 2007: Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

2008: Shirley Malcom, PhD, Director, Education and Human Resources Programs, American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Cathee Johnson Phillips is Executive Director of the NPA.

New Member Benefit: Invest in Yourself with Personal Coaching

The NPA is always looking to add new services that can benefit our members. One request we've had frequently is to provide personal or career counseling and/or mentoring. This year, we've been lucky enough to secure a partnership with youPlus Coaching Inc. As a special arrangement for NPA Coaching, youPlus has agreed to offer a person's first two months of coaching, a total of six sessions, at a significantly reduced price. [Click here](#) for more information.

Science Net Watch: Web 2.0 Science Communities Slowly Emerge Online

Mark A. Kroenke

In the last few years, the World Wide Web (WWW) has transitioned into a valuable tool that can enhance collaboration, creativity, data sharing and social networking. The novel services and applications built around the WWW platform that aim to extend information sharing and promote community building are collectively referred to as Web 2.0. Two new Web 2.0 sites, Researchgate.net and Epernicus.com, are trying to do for scientists what Facebook did for the rest of the world.

These sites offer specialized features such as message boards, the ability to create personalized profiles, and biographies of principal investigators that include publications, research interests, and current lab members. Epernicus also has a prominent feature called "BenchQ" that allows users to post questions and obtain responses relatively quickly from other Epernicus members.

Yet most scientists have never used these sites, largely because there is no pressing

need for the services they offer. Most tasks that can be accomplished through these sites are typically done by using another Web site or resource. For example, when looking for papers of interest, a student is much more likely to turn to Pubmed than to use Researchgate's "Semantic Relations" feature. The hope, however, is that through Web 2.0 the means by which scientists communicate can be streamlined and enhanced.

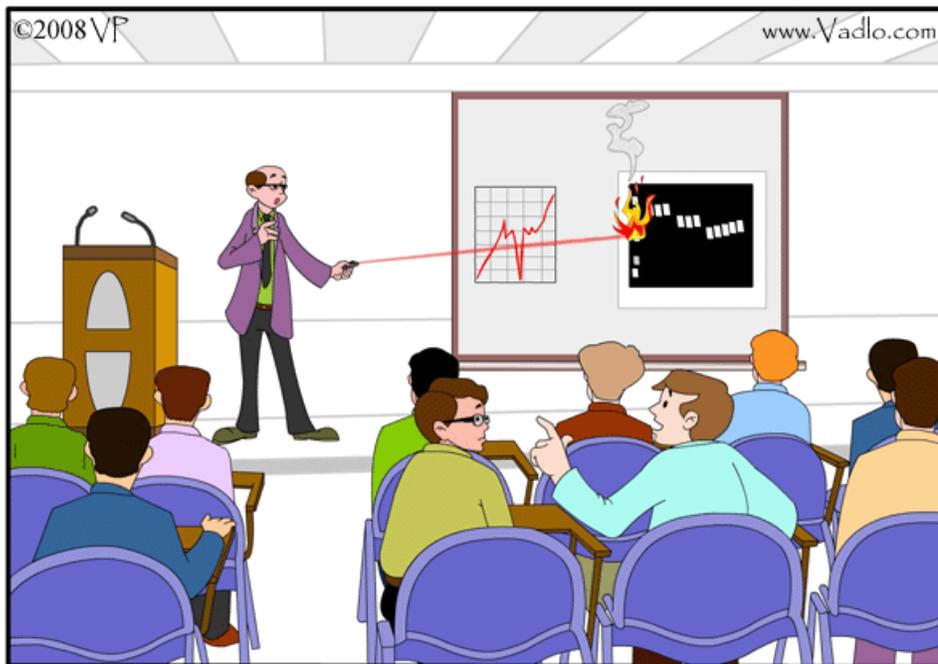
The primary challenge these sites face is getting enough people registered to make them worthwhile. If a question is posted on a message board, but no one answers it for 6 months, the board is of little use to anyone. Unfortunately, this seems to

be the case for most message boards with the exception of Epernicus' BenchQ, which is more fluid. If some Principal Investigators are listed on Epernicus but the majority are not, a graduate student searching for his or her future mentor will turn to a more reliable source. Furthermore, just as information disclosed on Facebook can often prove hazardous to young college graduates trying to find a job, a critical piece of data posted naively on a message board by a first year student could allow a competing group to scoop the lab that made the original discovery.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of potential in Web 2.0 for scientists. These sites could be used to hold Web conferences, and instead of a phone call or e-mail, geographically separated labs could communicate in a much more sophisticated way. Another useful feature would be a bulletin board of guest lectures, based on institution or location, allowing students and faculty to see listings of talks of interest taking place at nearby institutions. Finally, these sites could easily be made more fun and lively by allowing users to post pictures from the lab Christmas party, intellectually challenge a competing lab by sending them a quiz, or build a list of friends and colleagues. Web 2.0 science communities are works in progress, but have the potential to enhance greatly scientific communication and learning.

Mark Kroenke is a PhD candidate at the University of Rochester and NPA member.

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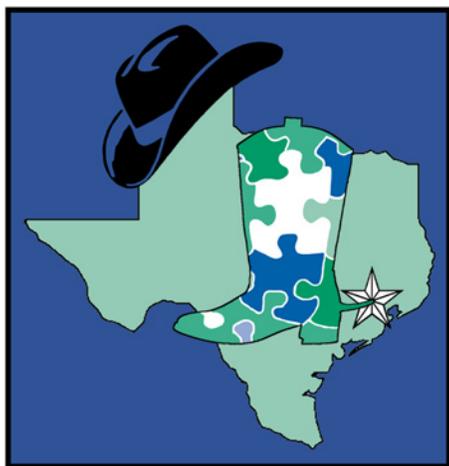


No wonder. He was stuck on this slide for last 15 minutes!

Preview of the Upcoming NPA Annual Meeting in Houston

Brenda Timmons

The 2009 NPA Annual Meeting will be held March 27-29 at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. In addition to M.D. Anderson, local hosts of the Annual Meeting include Baylor College of Medicine, Rice University, the University of Houston, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, and The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.



**National Postdoctoral Association
Seventh Annual Meeting
March 27 - 29, 2009; Houston, TX**

Once again this year, the event will feature pre-meeting postdoc association (PDA)/postdoc offices (PDO) leadership workshops on Friday. At past meetings, these sessions successfully provided postdocs and administrators with the opportunity to share valuable information on how to create and maintain strong and productive PDA/PDOs. The PDO sessions will include panels of experienced leaders who will present a summary of best practices at their institutions. The PDA sessions are designed for postdocs to network with participants from other institutions and gain knowledge that will help improve their home associations. An afternoon joint session will allow postdocs and administrators to work together on specific issues identified earlier in the day.

Saturday's main meeting will include a presentation by Peter Fiske, PhD, President and CEO of PAX Mixer, Inc. and author of several books aimed to help scientists with career development. His talk, entitled *Putting your Science to Work: Creating New Options and Opportunities via the Postdoc*, will present practical career strategies and tactics that postdocs can use to increase their chances of finding a satisfying and fulfilling professional path. The afternoon keynote address will be delivered by Nobel Laureate Peter Doherty, PhD, Professor at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis and the University of Melbourne, Australia and author of several books including *The Beginner's Guide to Winning the Nobel Prize: Advice for Young Scientists*. Saturday afternoon's poster session will showcase new and unique postdoctoral programs at institutions across North America. Sunday's plenary session will feature a panel discussion on the value of individual development plans (IDPs) with representatives from the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and institutions that have implemented mandatory IDPs. A variety of interactive workshops on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morn-

ing will include managing your relationship with your supervisors, rational career planning for scientists, mentoring trainees in communication skills, responsible conduct of research, and campus perspectives on diversity.

In response to feedback received from the 2008 Annual Meeting, this year's agenda will include longer breaks to provide additional time for networking. Other opportunities for networking include Friday evening's opening reception and "dine-arounds" and Saturday's conference luncheon and poster session reception. For the first time, Saturday evening will feature an all-attendee social event: The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston's Institute of Molecular Medicine will be the site of a Texas BBQ, complete with live entertainment.

For more information about the Annual Meeting including agendas, registration and lodging, please visit the [NPA Annual Meeting Web site](#).

Brenda Timmons is a Postdoctoral Fellow at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and Chair of the NPA Meetings Committee.

NPA MEETING ROUND-UP

The NPA continues to provide a national voice for postdoctoral scholars. Since our inception we have represented postdocs at over 275 national and regional meetings. Here is a round-up of recent and upcoming activity.

DECEMBER

- Council of Graduate Schools 48th Annual Meeting; "Graduate Schools and Post Doc Education"; Washington, D.C.; NPA Executive Director Cathee Johnson Phillips was recognized at the session, which included information about NPA.

JANUARY

- National Science Foundation (NSF); sponsored by the NSF Division of Graduate Education and Office of International Science and Engineering; presentation on the NPA and its future direction; Arlington, Virginia; by Johnson Phillips.

FEBRUARY

- University of Virginia Postdocs; seminar on career development, Charlottesville, Virginia; by NPA Member and Past Board Chair Crystal Icenhour.

MARCH

- NCI Center for Cancer Research Fellows and Young Investigators Committee (CCR-FYI 9th Annual Fellow's Colloquium; Hershey, Penn.; presentation about the NPA by Stacy Gelhaus, Chair of the NPA Board of Directors.

PRO/UAW Negotiations with the University of California Move Forward

Cathee Johnson Phillips

Please note: The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) maintains a neutral stance regarding unionization. The purpose of this article is to inform. For more information and to read a longer version of this article, please visit www.nationalpostdoc.org/unionization.

Postdoctoral Researchers Organize/International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (PRO/UAW) and the University of California (UC) began collective bargaining on Feb. 5, 2009. Negotiations are expected to take several months, said Dr. Matthew “Ok” O’Connor. O’Connor is one of six postdocs listed as members of the bargaining team on PRO/UAW’s Web site. In November, the postdocs at each of UC’s ten campuses elected a representative from their campus to serve on the team. No one from UC-Merced would run for election, but O’Connor said that he personally visited the Merced campus and interviewed the postdocs there, in order to be sure that their interests would be represented.

PRO/UAW was recognized by UC as the exclusive bargaining representative of UC postdoctoral scholars on Nov. 3, 2008, after the California Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) verified that a majority of UC’s nearly 5,800 postdoctoral scholars signed cards choosing PRO/UAW as their union. In December, both the university and the union team began working on their “sunshine” (public disclosure) proposals in preparation for the contract negotiations, and on January 12, UC and PRO/UAW exchanged initial proposals.

Only those postdoctoral scholars who held current signed union authorization cards were allowed to participate in the survey, but they could sign a card to participate. O’Connor said, “Signing a card

allows you to participate in union surveys and to vote and receive e-mails, but it is not a membership card. After we have a contract, everyone will have to sign up to become a member.”

Dr. Joanna Friesner, postdoctoral scholar at UC-Davis, signed a card this past summer after talking with a postdoc campus organizer. She expressed concern over the lack of representation for those who do not sign a card: “Broader input by postdocs is a little bit of a problem. On one hand, the union has been surveying and getting input from postdocs who signed the card. On the other hand, if you do not sign the card, there is no way of having input.” Friesner said that postdocs can no longer legally talk directly to the administration, because, regardless of whether a scholar has signed a card, the union now represents them.

Friesner has other concerns regarding the authorization cards, particularly the process involved in getting signatures. She said, “Recently, a foreign postdoc who was approached rather aggressively asked me to help her figure it out, to translate the card.” Because the majority of UC postdoctoral scholars are international scholars for whom English is a second language, Friesner wondered how many really understood what they signed. “For a long time, I tried to talk the campus postdoc representatives to the union into having a large meeting in which they would explain the benefits of unionization,” said Friesner. “But they said...that they would only do one-on-one meetings.” She continued, “the process made people a little nervous and confused. Of the 25 or so postdocs I’ve talked to, the majority were uncomfortable with the union strategy, even though many supported what the union was trying to do.”

Now that PRO/UAW has been certified as representing UC’s postdocs, all of the

eligible scholars must be represented by the union and must pay dues or fees, as per California state law. Union members will pay monthly dues of 1.15% of their gross income; non-member postdocs will pay monthly fees that will be slightly less than dues and determined after the collective bargaining process.

Although it is far too early to establish the effect of unionization on UC postdoctoral scholars, Friesner was willing to speculate. She said, “Obvious advantages will be if we have increased wages and better benefits. Currently, there is...a patchwork regarding rules and regula-

PRO/UAW, *continued on page 6*

NPA Member Round-Up

Thank you to the following sustaining members that have joined or renewed their membership since the last issue of The POSTDOCKET.

NEW

- Association of American Medical Colleges
- Concordia University
- Dartmouth College
- Maine Medical Cancer Research Institute

RENEWED

- American Society of Human Genetics
- Harvard University
- Medical College of Georgia
- Rutgers University
- The University of Alabama at Birmingham
- The University of Iowa
- University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey

AAAS/Science Careers to Launch New Diversity Portal

Sibby Anderson Thompkins

One of the major challenges for minority scientists, potential employers, and sponsors alike is networking or building relationships around common interests and goals. In an effort to create opportunities that support the professional aspirations and career development needs for scientists and engineers from underrepresented communities, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) created the new AAAS-Science Careers Diversity Portal that will be built upon the existing *Minority Scientists Network (MiSciNet)*, a web-based networking platform housed at the [Science Careers Web site](#).



Richard Weibl, Director of the Center for Careers in Science and Technology at the AAAS, says, “[The Diversity Portal’s] purpose is to promote diversity in the science and engineering workforce and to help build new communities of underrepresented populations in the sciences.

The Portal will facilitate students, post-docs, and young professionals getting the mentoring and support they need while offering potential employers and sponsors an effective way to identify and recruit minority candidates.”

Weibl works with AAAS career development programs to strengthen their offerings and to create new opportunities to support the career aspirations and development needs of future and current scientists. He says that through *MiSciNet*, AAAS saw the possibilities for creating a more interactive commu-

nity centered on diversity. Furthermore, the driving force behind the initiative was client feedback and many conversations with representatives from key professional societies and organizations. Among the groups that AAAS engaged during the development phase were the [Society for the Advancement for Chicanos and Native Americans](#), the [Association of Women in Science](#), the [American Indian Science and Engineering Society](#), the [National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals](#), the [National Association for Blacks in Bio](#), and the [NPA](#).



What makes the *MySciNet* site unique is that it is the only portal dedicated to promoting diversity in the sciences, and it will offer a search engine that will allow users to locate information on diversity-related organizations. Last, the Portal will offer many of the same capabilities of popular social utility networks such as *Facebook*, *LinkedIn*, and *MySpace*. Individuals or groups will be able to construct public profiles and create groups where they can connect with other users around a common interest in diversity or research.

NPA Executive Director, Cathee Johnson Phillips, is very pleased that NPA was invited to participate in this effort. She insists that this Portal is an important resource for postdocs and supporters. “*MySciNet* provides us with a wonderful avenue to connect with underrepresented postdoctoral scholars.”

AAAS plans to launch the new *MySciNet* this spring. Watch The POSTDOCKET for additional details.

Sibby Anderson Thompkins is the Director of Postdoctoral Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and serves as the Diversity Officer for the NPA.

PRO/UAW, *continued from page 5*
tions for postdocs. By having a union, the rules will be made clear to everyone.” She continued: “The main disadvantage is that many of us could end up paying dues or fees that exceed the benefits we gain. Typically, they talk about making an increase to the lowest salary [but] unless they negotiate across the board increases, only those at the bottom will benefit.” She is also concerned about the long-term effect of wage increases. “If we end up with a contract that dramatically increases the cost of supporting postdocs, sufficient funding may not be available.”

O’Connor, who has been an enthusiastic advocate of unions since before he came to UC Berkeley, is optimistic regarding the outcomes of unionization. He said,

“The union will give us a voice about our wages and working conditions. It will give us a seat at the bargaining table.

In November 2008, the NPA Board of Directors revisited the NPA’s official stance on unionization and confirmed that NPA should remain neutral regarding unionization. The Board, however, also felt that the NPA should play a more active role in educating postdoctoral scholars on the facts surrounding unionization. Avi Spier, one of the founders of the NPA, went on the record with his opinion: “The organization, aims, and methods of the NPA and postdoc unions are different and will continue to be so. The NPA remains the only national organization for postdocs and... needs to apply more of its influence to exploring system-wide

improvements that can only be brought about via dialog at the national level.”

Cathee Johnson Phillips is the Executive Director of the NPA.

The NPA Store
New designs now available!
www.cafepress.com/thenpastore

New NPA International Officers Focus on Advancing International Postdoc Issues

Jonathan Gitlin

International postdocs represent more than half of the total postdoc population living and working in the U.S. To ensure that the concerns of this constituency remain well represented, the NPA Board of Directors created the position of International Officer. Recently, Lisa Felix, an immigration attorney with the Philadelphia law firm Blank Rome LLP, and Jeremy Spohr, an International Student and Scholar Advisor at the University of Pennsylvania, were selected as the new NPA International Officers. Both are committed to address the special issues and needs of the international postdoc community.

Currently, Ms. Felix concentrates her practice in employment law. Previously, she provided immigration and student/

scholar services at the University of Pennsylvania, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale’s branch campus in Japan. She is an active member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and NAFSA: The Association of International Educators.

Mr. Spohr has over fourteen years of experience as an international educator. He began his career in English as a Second Language programs and student services at small schools in Vermont, Colorado and Massachusetts. He has been with the University of Pennsylvania’s Office of International Programs for the past four years and also is an active member of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.



Lisa Felix (left) and Jeremy Spohr (right) are the new NPA International Officers.

denied an U.S. entry visa in 2006, have had the negative effect of making the United States a less desirable destination for foreign researchers.

The White Paper recommends: elimination of the foreign residency requirement for J-1 scholars, enforcement of the prevailing wage laws by the Department

of Labor for H1-B postdocs, allowing spouses of postdocs on H1-B visas to work legally in the U.S., and establishment of a new non-immigrant classification specifically for non-immigrant international postdoctoral research scholars.

To quote the White Paper; “International postdoctoral researchers represent 50-72% of the pool of postdoctoral researchers in the U.S. and produce more peer-reviewed publications than U.S. postdoctoral researchers. This robust research productivity is at stake and could be lost, unless an outdated legislative framework is remedied. It is critical that our leaders in Congress recognize the importance of this unique set of individuals and work to create legislation that encourages the best and brightest to continue to come to the U.S.”

Jonathan Gitlin, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Kentucky and a member of the NPA Board of Directors.

International Postdoc Survival Guide

Are you dreaming of finding the perfect postdoctoral position in the USA but feel that you could benefit from guidance from international postdocs already in the USA? Do you have visa-related questions? Perhaps you are already in the USA and are now having problems obtaining a credit card? The NPA International Postdoc Committee has created a comprehensive survival guide to enhance the experience of doing a postdoc in the U.S. for International Postdocs. It includes our visa guide, information on what it is critical to know before accepting a postdoctoral position, and much more! Click [here](#) to check it out.

The success of the NPA *Survival Guide for International Postdocs* (2004) resulted in the subsequent release of a White Paper by the NPA on visa reform entitled, *International Postdoctoral Researchers and Their Importance to the Advancement of U.S. Science, Technology and National Security* (2007). Both add the NPA’s voice to an ever-growing body of stakeholders calling on Washington to revise the visa regulations for skilled workers.

Attracting skilled foreign scientists remains critical to the U.S. national interest; the contributions made by the U.S. research base of foreign-born and foreign-trained scientists is undeniable, with more than 30 percent of U.S. Nobel Laureates in the sciences falling into this category. High profile visa denial cases like that of Professor Goverdhan Mehta, a well respected Indian chemist who was

Postdocs Must Acquire Career Advocacy Skills

Anu Pradban and
Rashada Alexander

After receiving a PhD, most graduate students follow the conventional path of accepting a postdoctoral fellowship. As the postdoc training period increases, so do thoughts of what lies ahead. Recent statistics indicate that only 20 percent of young researchers will land a full-time tenure track academic position, leaving three-quarters of young scientists wondering where they fit into the scientific workforce and how to get there.

Several science-related career options have evolved to provide a vast array of unique opportunities including scientific writing, venture capitalism, medical science liaisons, patent law, as well as many others (the authors recommend reading “Alternate Careers in Science: Leaving the Ivory Tower” by C. Robbins-Roth). Your career choice should not only suit your talents and interests, but also your personal life circumstances and goals. Here we highlight some of the resources that can help you become your own career advocate.

Plan for Your Retirement with NPA Member Benefit

Are you planning for your retirement? Being an NPA member can help. The NPA, in partnership with MetLife, is now offering NPA members an opportunity to participate in a deferred annuity program, the MetLife Personal Pension BuilderSM. NPA would like to recognize Garnett-Powers & Associates, Inc. for their assistance, which made it possible for us to offer this benefit to our members. Garnett-Powers is a longtime friend of the NPA. For more information, please download an informational brochure [here](#).



I have trained dozens of Postdocs. One of them even got a faculty position!

Postdoctoral associations or offices (PDAs or PDOs) are good resources for postdocs interested in different career options. Most PDAs offer workshops and seminars to facilitate interaction with experts from various science-related fields such as industry, academia, law and government. Meeting experts from diverse backgrounds is vital. It enhances your awareness of opportunities outside academia and can open doors to the various fields that will utilize postdoctoral training and talent. Many PDAs also provide additional networking opportunities via activities such as career fairs and social mixers. Some universities offer career development courses to postdocs for free, or at a discount price. For instance, the University of California, San Francisco hosts a two-day course titled “Course in Scientific Leadership And Laboratory Management” that promotes leadership development for postdoctoral scholars and young faculty.

Networking outside of your institution and making yourself professionally visible through organization memberships and conferences is also incredibly important for discovering career opportunities. Valuable information about job opportunities and resume writing can be found on Web sites such as Sciencecareers.org, which powers NPA’s job board. Once you secure a job interview, it is your responsibility as a candidate to be confident and honest about

your experience and talent. If you don’t get a job following your first interview, remember that practice makes perfect. Keep trying, because every interview you complete will only better your performance.

All of these tools can help you realize your career goals, but *only if you* take the initiative and become your own advocate. As postdocs, we often focus on research projects and grants and consider career planning as a detail that can be handled later. It is often said, “the devil is in the details”. By focusing on some of these career-shaping resources early on, we can avoid getting bedeviled as we pursue the careers we want and the success we deserve.

The NPA has several useful resources to help make the right career choice including self-evaluations, resume writing, funding, networking opportunities and job listings. *Editor’s note:* Most recently, the NPA has partnered with [youPlus Coaching, Inc.](#) to offer personal coaching to postdocs at significantly reduced pricing.

Anu Pradban, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida and Vice-Chair of the NPA Resource Development Committee. Rashada Alexander, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a member of the NPA Resource Development and Advocacy Committees.

Careering through Your Postdoc, Part IV

Jeffrey P. Townsend

The postdoctoral position can be so transient and the postdoctoral experience so varied, that there are few descriptions of how to be a good postdoc. However, the question is an important one, and in between publishing papers, might be worth some careful consideration by the legions who, in this embarrassingly nebulous role, carry on some of the most important work on the front lines of science. To lend some perspective on the postdoctoral experience, I've encapsulated the advice I've given to finishing graduate students, new postdocs, and postdocs on the job market about what they should do as a postdoc into the answers to a few simple questions.

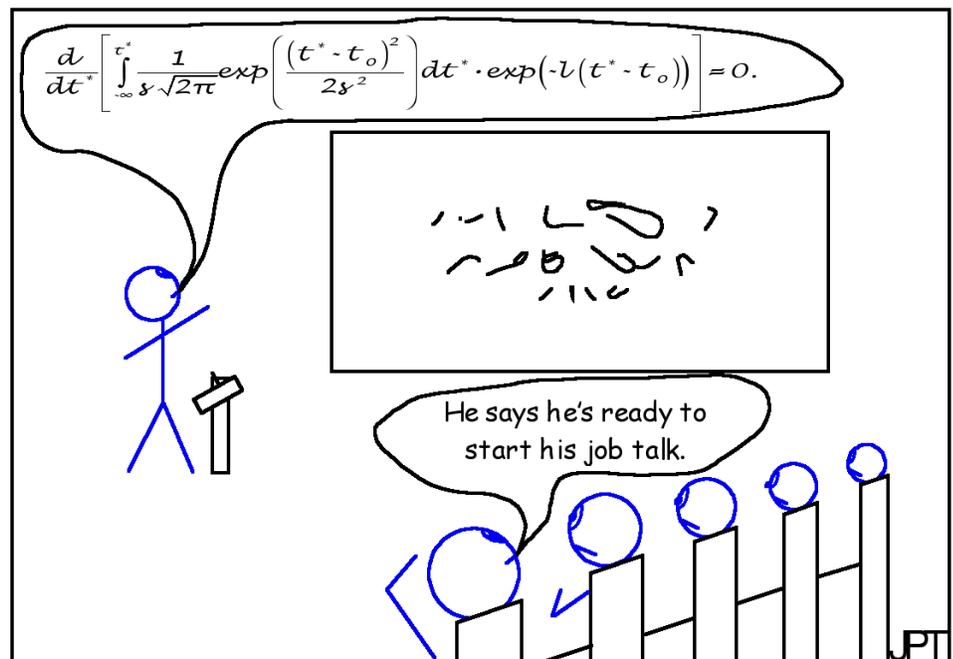
IV. How can I be selected among so many candidates for a "permanent" academic position?

1. Be sure an academic position is what you want! If you really like lab work but not writing and teaching, for instance, then an attractive alternative may be a position in industry or government research, rather than in academia. Many other options in business and other sectors may be achievable for applicants who have demonstrated their fortitude, dedication, and intellectual rigor by getting a PhD and successfully completing postdoctoral work. On the other hand, academia is often what you make of it—if you really make it a priority to spend time in the lab, you can; just realize that such a priority often (but not always) conflicts with ambitious career goals, which call for you to regularly speak about your research, write proposals and papers, and build a large research group. Think carefully at this point about your goals in academia, because for the first time you may be about to choose what could be a truly permanent position. Before this stage in an academic career, your drive to excel in your field can always be justified as a sacrifice to maintain multiple future options. Postdocs are notoriously mobile because the postdoctoral position is so transitory. But choosing where to live and

what lifestyle to lead, although difficult to accomplish in academia because of the sparseness of appropriate job openings and offers, may justifiably trump careerist goals at this point. Such considerations deserve your attention now.

2. Give an astoundingly good research job talk. To what extent in your job talk do you feature your technical virtuosity with volumes of data and sophisticated analysis? Conversely, to what extent do you simplify material and slow your pace to ensure that everyone understands the relevance of your work and follows your argument? Many postdocs feel a greater desire to prove their virtuosity than to give context and provide helpful pointers. Thus the most common response is technical

“yes, that makes sense” to everything you tell them. You must earn their scientific trust. Then, take five minutes just when they might switch from nodding “yes” to nodding off, hit them with something really impressive – the huge data set you have gathered, or the amazingly sophisticated analysis you have developed, or the result that shakes their paradigm. You have to be clear and technically correct at this point, but according to this scheme you are now at last permitted to leave nearly all your audience in the dust. BUT you must catch them softly from this mental free-fall by closing your presentation with a once-again crystal clear discussion of the consistencies with other findings. The details of the denouement must demonstrate your confidence in your conclusions.



overload lack of context. But you really do have to impress them with your technical virtuosity, or they certainly won't offer you a job. So how can you combine both clarity and virtuosity so that the audience both believes in your work and is impressed by your incredible skills? One formula for structuring a successful job talk is to begin with a very broad contextual statement, and continue the talk so that you honestly believe every faculty member listening will fully understand for a full 35-40 minutes. The idea is to get them nodding, saying,

And if you can work it in, give a hint of something big that is yet to come!

3) Give an astoundingly good teaching talk, too, if that is required of you. If asked, consider it an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to create a coherent and completely understandable lecture. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you must look technically impressive here – all your technical impressiveness should be in your research lecture. Of course, don't make any

Careering, continued on page 10

Careering, *continued from page 9*
technical mistakes, either; “clear” and “cohesive” are adjectives you’re striving for. Only add “entertaining” as a bonus, if it comes fairly naturally to you. A stilted joke can blemish an otherwise impressive seminar.

4) *Be wary of the “chalk talk”.* A “chalk talk” is usually a separate talk that is sometimes sprung on the candidate shortly before the interview trip. In it, assorted faculty will meet with you and ask open-ended questions. The “chalk talk”, though a nefarious practice, may serve a variety of purposes to the faculty who attend. For example, it may be used to assess how a candidate “thinks on their feet”, in which case you will likely feel like you are experiencing your prelim exam all over again. It may be a way for “leftover” faculty, those who could not meet you for a block in your interview schedule, to get a chance to know you. This case is the most agreeable case. In my experience, it has nearly always been an opportunity for faculty members to grill you on how you will get your first outside funding. Considering the relative disparity of experience between the faculty and you in this aspect of the scientific enterprise, you can imagine how it may be a grueling experience. In any case, do not take a “chalk talk” lightly just because you are told it is “informal.” You should do your best to find out what they might be expecting, and you should prepare like crazy for it.

Jeffrey P. Townsend, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Yale University.

Volunteer for the NPA

It’s a great time to join an NPA committee and help advance the interests of postdoctoral fellows and the U.S. research community. Explore the opportunities available [here](#). Contact a committee chair to become involved today!

Postdocs and the Federal Income Contributions Act (FICA) Tax

Rachel Rublen

For postdoctoral scholars, the Federal Income Contributions Act (FICA) Tax oftentimes creates a complex and frustrating experience, but understanding how FICA has been applied historically can help clarify how it impacts postdoctoral scientists today.

The Social Security Act, part of the 1930s “New Deal” to bring the country out of the Great Depression, provides a living wage to disabled people or those too old to work. FICA, funds Social Security and, from the 1960s onwards, Medicare. On your pay statement, FICA may appear in two categories: Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) or Medicare. The current FICA tax is 15.3 percent of your gross income. You and your employer share this tax burden and each pay 7.65 percent.

For decades, medical residents and postdocs continued to pay income tax, but were exempt from FICA, under the Student Exemption. In 1998, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the University of Minnesota did not have to pay \$8 million unpaid FICA for its medical residents to the Social Security Administration. Upon this decision, several institutions, who previously had paid FICA on their medical residents, filed claims for refunds.

In the resulting mess, some courts ruled in favor of the IRS and some ruled against it. Faced with the prospect of a crippling \$3.9 billion dollar loss to the Social Security trust fund, the IRS declared in 2005 that the Student FICA Exemption does not apply to postdoctoral scholars

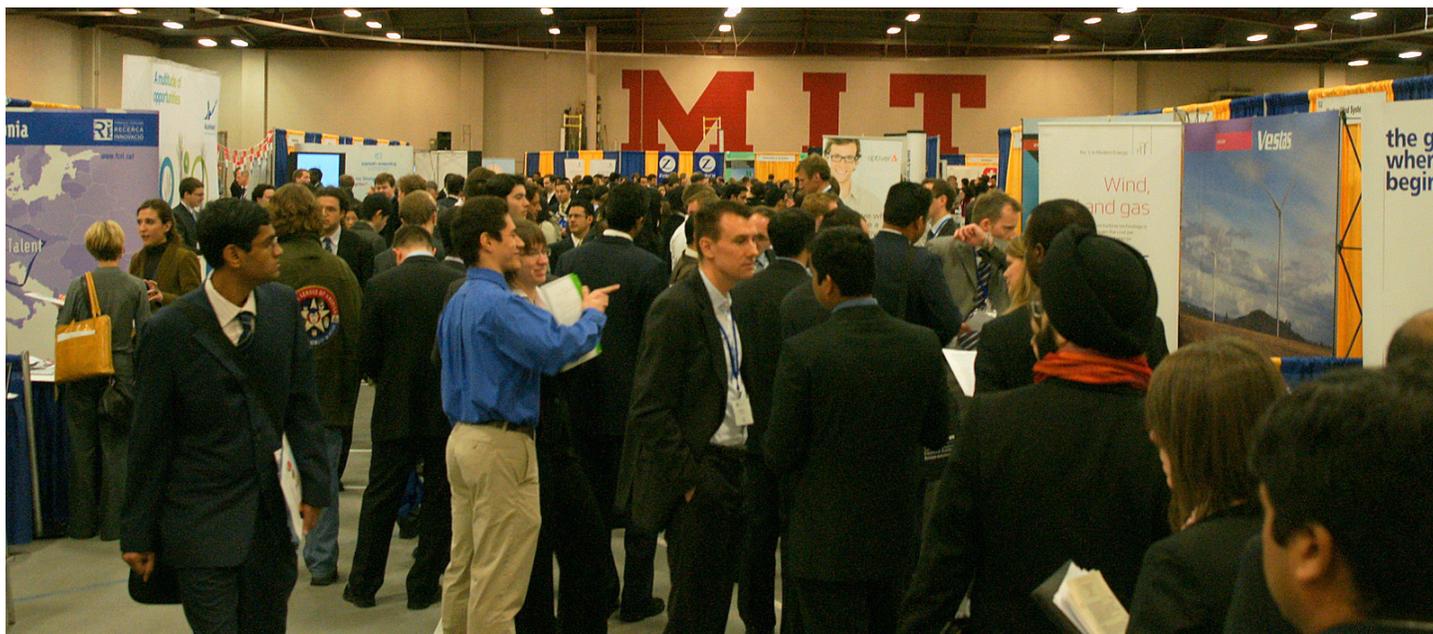
and medical residents. While maintaining this publicly, the IRS issued private letter rulings to some universities that granted postdoctoral scholars exempt.

Part of the problem stems from use of the title “postdoc” when “medical resident” or a FICA-eligible title is more appropriate. The NPA promotes the use of its definition for postdoctoral scholar, and encourages employers to provide equal benefits to postdocs regardless of funding source. The goal of the NPA is to track postdocs as well as their funding sources and relative benefits through its institutional policy database, which is currently undergoing renovation. When the database is available again, many hope that this resource will help establish a precedent by publicizing universities with FICA-exempt postdocs.

Not paying FICA is in the best interests of international postdocs who do not plan to retire in the United States and will not reap the benefits of Social Security. Other postdocs want to save their money from a system possibly doomed to bankruptcy. Social Security benefits are a complex calculation based on FICA-eligible earnings, so postdoctoral scholars who are U.S. citizens may wish to pay FICA in anticipation of retirement. Income received under H-1b visas, held by many international postdocs, is by definition not FICA-exempt.

This confusion has created many disheartening stories because in some circumstances postdoc benefits are tied inexorably to FICA status. A fellowship that restricts the recipient from employee status can strip a postdoc of benefits, turning a prestigious award like a National Research Service Award into a bureaucratic nightmare and forcing families to scramble to find money for health insurance.

Rachel Rublen, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Missouri and Chair of the NPA Resource Development Committee.



The 13th European Career Fair was held January 24-26, 2009 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Global Recruiting at the 13th European Career Fair

Arne Hessenbruch

Increasingly, postdoctoral scholars are looking abroad for professional opportunities and likewise, employers are recruiting globally. The success of the [European Career Fair \(ECF\)](#), which is hosted annually by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology European Club connects employers in Europe with the most talented scientists in the United States. Run mostly by postdocs and graduate students from Boston area universities, the event in recent years has drawn thousands of candidates and over a hundred employers. The 13th ECF, held January 24-26, 2009 in Cambridge, Mass. was no exception.

It's a win-win situation: Employers get access to over 4,000 highly qualified job candidates, who in turn either land jobs or at least get a better understanding of the global marketplace for intellectual labor. In addition, the postdocs and graduate students running the career fair get valuable experience and foster useful contacts.

The ECF can provide insight into what employers seek. Many candidates assume that job interviews will primarily focus on their academic qualifications and that they should strive to fit several of the openings that the company might have on offer. However, Anne Lee, Head of Global Talent Attraction at Novo Nordisk, explains



that while academic excellence is necessary, it is by no means sufficient. While not all employers have the same attitude, Lee says that research will only get done when an individual purposefully drives the agenda. Employers want candidates with passion and long-range goals, not glorified lab technicians.

Opportunities are opening up globally for well-educated individuals. While the U.S. has been a popular destination historically, the situation is changing. Recently, the *New York Times* documented the flow of second-generation Indian-Americans back to India, where opportunities can trump those in the U.S. (see [here](#)). Similarly, the attitude of many Chinese students pursuing a higher education in

the United States is changing. Whereas 10 years ago many Chinese aimed for a Green Card, now many are weighing their options. Most of the candidates mentioned quality of life as an important motivator for seeking jobs in Europe. Europeans often have their own parochial reasons for considering life better in Europe: food, language, street cafes, cityscapes, the walking life as opposed to driving a car, or even that soccer is on TV rather than baseball. Interestingly, the 4,000 candidates who registered for the 2009 European Career Fair divide fairly evenly into thirds: one third is European, one third is American, and the rest were mostly Chinese or Indian.

Of course, this is not to say that life is better in one place than another, or that life in the United States is not attractive. The United States, Europe, China, and India each offer unique opportunities. The point is rather that a postdoctoral scholar has exposure to other parts of the world through classmates, colleagues, and conferences. It might be worth pursuing your own agenda regardless of your geographic destination.

Arne Hessenbruch, PhD, is a Historian of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

What is the Visa Backlog and How Will it Affect You?

Adam Frank and Brendan Delaney

The information contained within this article is for informational purposes only and is not legal advice or a substitute for legal counsel, nor does it constitute advertising or a solicitation.

Everyone who comes to the United States for postgraduate training or work needs a visa. It could be a temporary visa, like a J-, F-, or H-visa, or it can be a long-term immigrant visa, widely known as a green card. Each year there are a limited number of immigrant visas available. For employment based immigrant visas (including self-sponsored categories) there are approximately 140,000 visas issued per year. Individuals who decide to become a permanent resident require an issued immigrant visa number (whether or not they actually have an immigrant visa stamp in their passport). It is the Department of State, not Immigration, that issues immigrant visa numbers.

The employment based (EB) immigrant visas that are available every year are allocated between each employment based

immigrant visa type by grouping. The two categories most relevant to postdocs are the EB1 and EB2, each of which receives about 40,000 visas per year. The 40,000 visas allocated to each category are then divided equally among ALL countries. When a country expends their allocation, no more immigrants from that country can receive permanent residence for that year, and they are put into a backlog. Those who are put into a backlog will receive their permanent residence when a visa number becomes available. The Department of State Visa Bulletin is updated every month, indicating whether there are backlogs in specific categories for specific countries. If a category is backlogged for your country, you cannot apply through adjustment of status or to consular process (two methods of securing permanent residence in the U.S.) until an immigrant visa is available.

For most postdocs pursuing a green card through an Employment Based Application, the backlog is not an issue. For most countries, postdocs can file an EB1 application and the adjustment of status simultaneously, if applicable. The same is true for most postdocs in the EB2 category. However, for India and China the EB2 category is currently backlogged (India to January 2004, China to January 2005),

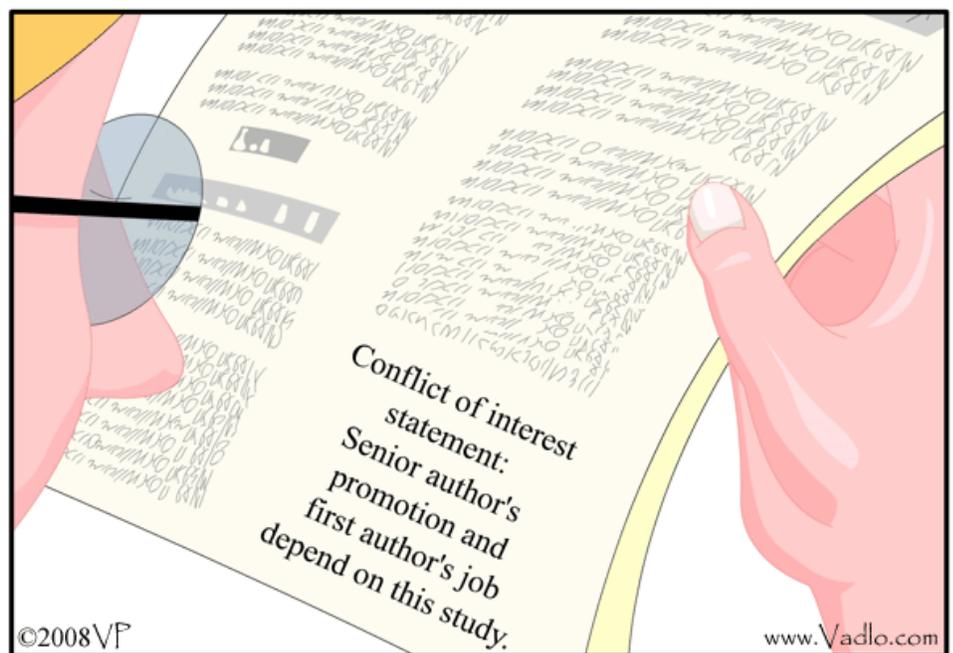
meaning that only those people who filed their application on or prior to these dates can now obtain an EB2 green card. Due to an oversubscription of EB2 visa numbers from these countries, individuals from China and India filing an EB2 at this time CANNOT file the adjustment at present. These dates will continue to change, so if you are pursuing a green card and are affected by this issue you should consult the Visa Bulletin (and your attorney) to review the dates. The Visa Bulletin is generally published in the middle of each month and gives the dates for the following month.

While the backlog does not affect everyone, it is important to understand the implications of the backlog issue as it does have the ability to affect more and more people as demand for permanent residence in the United States grows. Checking the Visa Bulletin monthly and talking with your attorney regularly are two good ways to keep up on this issue.

Adam Frank, Esq. and Brendan Delaney are at the law firm of Leavy & Frank, L.L.C. (<http://www.leavyfrank.com>), which specializes in immigration law. A longtime friend of the NPA, the firm conducts Legal Seminars for International Postdocs on behalf of the NPA.

Postdoc Tax Filing Resources Available on the NPA Web Site

Tax Day is fast approaching! The NPA provides information and resources on tax issues facing postdocs. Topics include: tax withholding, reporting fellowship income, filing estimated taxes, FICA, self-employment tax and taxes for the international postdoc. For more information, please check the [Tax Issues for Postdocs](#) section of the NPA Web site.



POLICY POINT

Lucia Mokres

As 2008 came to a close, the Advocacy Committee focused on addressing tasks that were part of the NPA Annual Operating Plan for 2008 but that had been less attended to during the year due to pressing issues such as the National Research Service Award (NRSA) stipend freeze. The committee formed a series of strategic plans to help us coordinate our activities in 2009 in order to ensure that these important issues will be addressed.



The first of these issues involved advocating for the adoption of the NPA Recommended Practices by institutions and professional organizations. To this end, we formulated a strategic plan outlining the steps needed to assess which institutions/organizations have already adopted the recommended practices. The next step is to work with the NPA

Resource Development and Outreach Committees to support the adoption of these practices by institutions and professional organizations.

The International Postdoctoral Committee (IPC) White paper, which provides a position statement on the challenges faced by international postdocs, was also assessed. As with the Recommended Practices workgroup, the IPC workgroup formulated a strategic plan to advocate for the adoption of the recommended practices outlined in the document. It will need to be recirculated so that advocacy efforts on this front will be renewed, due to the recent change in administration on Capitol Hill. A final strategic plan was developed to address the Agenda for Change.

Of course, 2009 also brings with it a new Annual Operating Plan. Many tasks pertain to advocacy issues that have been and likely will continue to be ongoing

efforts of the NPA, such as encouraging the NIH to adhere to promised NRSA stipend and cost of living increases and advocating for enhanced data collection, analysis, and reporting on the status and career outcomes of postdocs supported by federal agencies. The committee is currently forming workgroups in order to tackle the 2009 tasks. If you're interested in volunteering for any these issues, please contact us.

Finally, on behalf of the Advocacy Committee, I would like to thank the fantastic group of volunteers that contributed to our success in 2008. As we look forward to continued success in 2009, please remember that the NPA Committees of the Membership, including Advocacy, are always looking for volunteers. For more information on how to become involved with the NPA, please check the [NPA Web site](#).

Lucia Mokres, DVM, is a Program Specialist at Hantel Technologies and Chair of the NPA Advocacy Committee.

NEWS

J-1 Scholar: A New Five-Year Rule and 24-Month Bar

The Department of State has announced an extension of the maximum period of participation from 3 years to 5 years for J Professors and Research Scholars. This new policy became effective on November 4th, 2006 and applies to scholars who have held another nonimmigrant visa within the previous year. However, scholars would have to wait 24-month (two-year bar) before they could apply for another five-year visa once their visas expired. Further information about the Exchange Visitor Program is available on the Department of State Web site.

Science Careers Releases Career Basics Booklet

Looking for some great career advice? Check out the new, updated Career Basics Booklet from Science Careers. As part of the Science Careers Outreach Program, we have collected in a booklet a series of articles addressing all manner of career development issues. The 80-page booklet has all the information that you need to get your career on the right track: articles and resource lists provide information on choosing a career path, marketing yourself, skills needed in different career paths, and diversity issues.

Approximately 25,000 print copies of the first version of the Career Basics booklet, printed in 2007, have been distributed

and many more people have accessed it online. The new booklet is available [here](#).

17-Month Extension of Optional Practical Training for Certain Highly Skilled Foreign Students

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security released today (4/7/08) an interim final rule extending the period of Optional Practical Training (OPT) from 12 to 29 months for qualified F-1 non-immigrant students. The extension will be available to F-1 students with a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics who are employed by businesses enrolled in the E-Verify program.

You are invited!



**National Postdoctoral Association
7th ANNUAL MEETING
March 27-29, 2009
The University of Texas
M. D. Anderson Cancer Center
Houston, Texas**

**Come join us for the largest meeting and networking event
in the postdoctoral community!**

- Plan to attend the Leadership Workshops on March 27th for insights on creating and sustaining a vibrant PDA or PDO.
- Enjoy meeting fellow postdocs while you explore your career development.
- Network at a good old-fashioned Texas BBQ at the Institute for Molecular Medicine, UTHSC-Houston.

Advance registration closes March 13. For more information or to register, follow this link:
http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/2009_AnnualMeeting

Host sponsors include:

- Baylor College of Medicine
- Rice University
- The University of Houston
- The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
- The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center
- The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center Office of Student and Alumni Affairs
- The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

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Keynote by

Dr. Peter Doherty

Professor, Nobel Prize Laureate
Author of *The Beginners Guide to
Winning the Nobel Prize*