

Changing the Culture of Science: Minority Postdoctoral Organizations Help Lead the Way

Sibby Anderson Thompkins, Vanessa González-Pérez, and Jennifer Cohen

Considerable attention has been given to the challenges that face underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities (URM), individuals with disabilities, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds as they transition from graduate studies to postdoctoral and permanent research positions. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Working Group on Diversity in the Biomedical Research Workforce recently issued a [report](#) recommending that attracting and retaining the best and most diverse scientists be made a national priority. URM scientists and researchers often face significant obstacles throughout their careers, including isolation, stereotype threat, unconscious bias, minimal academic and social support, and few, if any, faculty mentors and role models from the same racial and ethnic backgrounds. To mitigate some of these obstacles and increase the overall numbers of URM faculty, investigators, postdoctoral scholars, and students in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) pipeline, the NIH has released several Requests for Applications (e.g., Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity, the National Research Mentoring Network, and the Coordination and Evaluation Center) to “support innovative and transformative approaches to increase the diversity of the biomedical workforce” and “create a wide-ranging culture shift to facilitate broad impact on many diverse biomedical research scientists.”

Although the NIH efforts are encouraging, many URM postdoctoral leaders have taken matters into their own hands by spearheading peer-led minority postdoctoral organizations (MPOs) that aim to provide support, professional development, networking, and mentoring opportunities and ultimately strengthen the STEM URM pipeline. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins School

of Medicine, and Emory University are among a handful of institutions that have dedicated peer-led MPOs to serve the URM postdoctoral community.

The mission of many of these organizations, such as the Minority Postdoctoral Alliance (MPA) at UNC is “to bring together underrepresented African American, Hispanic, and American Indian postdoctoral scholars across disciplines to build valuable professional networks and promote and support diversity and inclusion.” Vanessa González-Pérez, PhD, one of the former founders of the UNC Alliance and Assistant Research Professor at Washington State University, asserts that

“The UNC MPA strives to provide a sense of community and support for racial and ethnic URM postdoctoral scholars at UNC through activities such as [the] Annual MPA Welcome Breakfast, mentoring and research luncheons with URM faculty, networking events, and participation in the UNC Postdoctoral Association leadership. These activities provide a platform for URM postdocs to network, meet mentors, and offer participants the opportunity to learn about resources available for professional development in academia.”

The Minority Postdoctoral Council (MPC) at Emory University plays a similar role. Otis Smart, PhD, a postdoc in the Department of Neurosurgery at Emory and Chair of the MPC, contends that minority postdoctoral organizations play an important role in helping to change the culture of science. Smart clarifies that, though peer-led,

“The MPC provides an institutional infrastructure for addressing issues that affect [the] URM [postdoctoral] population. URM postdocs find support and communicate with one another in

ways that might be difficult with their non-URM counterparts. Furthermore, groups like the MPC lead by example, showing URM scientists and researchers can be successful in a myriad of careers while negating negative cultural stereotypes or bias.”

These groups also provide an invaluable service to their hosting institutions. Lashauna Myers Connell is a past NPA Diversity Officer and the former advisor to Penn’s Postdoctoral Diversity Committee:

“For most research-intensive institutions, the URM postdoctoral population comprise an average of 2-6% of the overall postdoctoral population....[A]t the postdoctoral level, these committees or organizations provide a supportive network in an environment that many have expressed as hostile and unwelcoming. So, these groups greatly serve the larger science community by identifying key concerns that often impact the STEM diversity pipeline, such as the need for more role models and mentors from underrepresented backgrounds. Further, members of these organizations often volunteer to serve as mentors to URM graduate students and undergraduates, both informing and providing many of the ‘best practices’, [including] diversity-related interventions, programs, and mentoring, to support underrepresented populations in science.”

The establishment of these MPOs at research-intensive institutions has been a successful grassroots approach to changing the culture of science. These peer-led initiatives are a clear indication of the need for tailored professional development and support of URM postdocs. As more MPOs are created, the unique needs of URM postdocs will be met. It will be interesting to chart how this sup-

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toral Associate at Boston University School of Medicine and Chair of the NPA Advocacy Committee. Tracy Costello, PhD, is Program Manager in the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center and Vice-Chair of the NPA Advocacy Committee.

Meetings Committee

Rachel Bergerson and Jana Stone

The Meetings Committee has started to plan for the NPA's 12th Annual Meeting, to be held at the Washington University (WashU) School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4-6, 2014. Please save the date for this meeting!

We are organizing an exciting and stimulating program filled with networking opportunities as well as interesting sessions and informative workshops. Look for a call for workshop proposals and nominations for the Distinguished Service Award to be coming soon. The fundraising subcommittee has also finalized a fundraising prospectus to send to potential donors and sponsors. Please contact us with any information about potential sponsors or suggestions for new fundraising approaches.

The local host committee at WashU has reserved excellent facilities for the NPA meeting as well as a hotel that is within walking distance of the campus. The local hosts are also planning a fun social event for meeting attendees, which will be announced closer to the meeting date. In addition, WashU will be holding their 10th Annual Postdoctoral Research Symposium the day before the NPA meeting on Thursday, April 3, 2014. All NPA meeting attendees are welcome to attend this half-day event, and all postdoctoral scholars are encouraged to submit scientific abstracts for the poster session. More details on this and other events will be coming soon.

We hope to "See you in St. Louis" next April for a great meeting!

Rachel Bergerson, PhD, is a postdoctoral associate at the University of Minnesota and is Chair of the Meetings Committee for the 2014 NPA Annual Meeting. Jana Stone, PhD, is the Scientific Coordinator at the Duke Center for Systems Biology and is Vice Chair of the Meetings Committee for the 2014 NPA Annual Meeting.

Outreach Committee

Darwin Operario

The major focus of the Outreach Committee has been National Postdoc Appreciation Week (NPAW). For more information, please see "National Postdoc Appreciation Week: A Celebration of Postdoctoral Scholars" in this issue of *The POSTDOCKET*.

Darwin J. Operario, PhD, MPH is a Research Associate in the Division of Infectious Diseases and International Health at the University of Virginia Health System and is the Chair of the Outreach Committee.

Resource Development Committee

Sanjukta Chakraborty
The Resource Development Committee has been busy with a number of projects as we head into the second half of this year. We have finished the annual review of the NPA's Web site, which enabled us to ensure that all resources and links being offered to the postdoctoral community are current and relevant. This core task also helped us identify existing gaps in resources that we may need to focus on in the future. We have also been busy developing a mentoring toolkit that will serve as a starting template for mentors and their mentees and aims to bring together the best recommended practices that have been successful at various institutions. Additionally, we have undertaken the task of expanding the core competencies developed by the NPA to include a lot more non-biomedical resources. If you are interested in being a part of this project, please let us know!

In the current environment of dwindling federal funds, it is imperative that we

focus on resources essential for postdoc career advancement. The leadership of the Resource Development Committee presented a workshop at the NPA 11th Annual Meeting that was very well received. We have been incorporating all the feedback gathered into our task of further developing the career section of the NPA's resources. We would definitely like to hear from you if are looking for any resource that you think would be an important addition to the existing resources. We have other exciting projects going on in parallel as we create profiles of former postdocs who have been highly successful in diverse career paths. We are also revamping the international grants database, which will be a comprehensive database of fellowships and research grants that international postdocs are eligible to receive. The committee is always looking for new, dedicated volunteers who are passionate about fostering the postdoc community and postdoc career enrichment. So come join us and help us in these efforts!

Sanjukta Chakraborty, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Texas A&M Health Science Center and Chair of the NPA Resource Development Committee.

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port affects the retention and promotion of URM scholars into tenured faculty positions. The positive response of postdocs involved in MPOs, along with their success as trainees and future mentors, is expected to diversify academia and therefore strengthen the research institutions, which together will change the culture of science.

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