

research at UC Berkeley. Even before that e-mail, some faculty members were concerned that unionization would, ultimately, lead to fewer postdoc posts and fewer opportunities for graduate students.

As salaries increase, in theory, less money is available for other grant expenditures. This could hit some grant budgets harder than others. For example, the average US National Science Foundation award is significantly less than that of the National Institutes of Health. The National Science Foundation intends to reassess its grant proposal guidelines if the need arises, according to Dana Topousis, an agency spokeswoman. She adds that grantees do have some flexibility to transfer funds from one budget category to another, which could help.

Principal investigators might have to make difficult staffing changes to meet budgets. "If you make the postdoc stipend prohibitively high, principal investigators will opt to hire more graduate students," says Carlito Lebrilla, a chemist at UC Davis who is tracking union developments. "Some people see unionization as devastating to the research endeavour." There is also the question of whether the more senior, successful principal investigators will be better equipped to absorb extra postdoc costs than newer investigators.

Others fear that union-sanctioned activities will interfere with their postdoc responsibilities — being asked to strike being the most obvious example. But union supporters and non-supporters alike agree that striking — the ultimate bargaining chip of unions — isn't realistic for postdocs. Postdocs need to publish papers to have a chance of obtaining a faculty job; few postdocs are likely to adhere to a strike if the union called for one. The final UC postdoc contract stipulates that postdocs will not strike, taking a risky strategy off the table. "We didn't want to have postdocs put that kind of pressure on themselves," says Norval Hickman, a union supporter and clinical psychology postdoc at UC San Francisco. "We need a good letter of recommendation to get that first independent academic position — and there were definitely concerns that a strike would create an environment that might make that difficult."

Union contracts could present other problems. Kukor hopes that Rutgers' negotiations don't affect the flexible way in which many faculty staff mentor postdocs. "Each postdoc

I've worked with over the past 25 years is unique, and I work to accommodate their individual needs," he says. "I'm concerned that a standardized contract may remove some of the degrees of freedom I use to tailor career development."

SOFT POWER

The prospect of unionization has prompted many academic institutions to actively address postdoc concerns — potentially obviating unionization completely. Many institutions that train postdocs hope to avoid unions by recognizing postdocs' value and treating them fairly, says Peter Hitchcock, director of the office of postdoctoral studies at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor. At his university, that includes providing a range of career development services — including workshops on how to set up a laboratory and opportunities to learn about career options outside academia — intended to help postdocs to realize their career goals. Megan Ballinger, president of the University of Michigan postdoctoral association, notes that unionization isn't an issue at the medical school, despite Michigan's automotive and union legacy.

Administrators don't necessarily need the pressure of union provisions to spur extraordinary measures. Consider the case of Traci Lyons. In 2007, she was only seven days into a postdoc appointment at the University of Colorado in Denver when she discovered she was pregnant. Because the school had no maternity-leave policy in place, her mentor worked with the legal department to establish a 45-day maternity leave specific to Lyons. A year later, Lyons was asked to help the administration draft a much-needed set of postdoc policies — including guidelines for minimum salaries, terms of employment and maternity leave. John Freed, dean of the graduate school of the Anschutz Medical Campus of the University of Denver, oversaw the creation of an office of postdoctoral affairs and helped secure the \$250,000 necessary to ensure that all postdocs on campus received health care and disability benefits. O'Connor, however, notes that without a union-backed contract, a university could reverse its decisions at any time.

Not every campus will be proactive and take such steps. Budding scientists would be wise to gauge the changing landscape of postdoc unionization. And institutions would be wise to anticipate postdoc needs (see *Nature* 467, 624; 2010). O'Connor says he has received many requests from postdocs and postdoc associations for information about how the UC unionized. "Postdocs are essential to an institution's research efforts," says Hitchcock. "Institutions that do not acknowledge that do so at their own risk." ■

Virginia Gewin is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon.

POSTDOCS

Official appreciation

National Postdoc Appreciation Week was officially recognized by the US Congress on 23 September. The move confers no funding and creates no laws. But it is vital for building awareness of postdocs' research contributions as well as of their compensation issues and other woes, says Cathee Johnson Phillips, executive director of the National Postdoc Association (NPA) in Washington DC. The NPA, along with institutions nationwide, began the week in 2009. This year, it was 20–24 September and more than 70 institutions took part. In the past, most legislators knew little about postdocs, says Phillips. "Now, when our members talk to them about compensation and benefits, they'll say, 'Let's talk,' not 'What's a postdoc?'" she says.

FUNDING

Plant grants announced

To boost interest in plant research, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland, will for the first time fund plant-science investigator awards. The HHMI and its co-funder, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation in Palo Alto, California, will allocate up to 15 awards worth a total of US\$75 million. Plant science is underfunded in the United States, says Robert Tjian, the institute's president, adding that plants serve as useful experimental models for biomedical research. Awardees must have run their own lab for at least four years. They will receive a five-year appointment that may be renewed indefinitely for further five-year terms. The deadline for applications is 9 November.

AWARDS

Travel for collaboration

To promote cross-disciplinary research and collaboration, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, has created travel awards of up to US\$15,000 each for US and Canadian citizens or permanent residents. Applicants should hold or be pursuing a PhD in chemistry, physics, mathematics, computer science, statistics or engineering, and want to investigate biological questions with another lab or through attending a course. Biologists looking to collaborate with, or learn from, a physical scientist can also apply. The funds are for travel expenses anywhere in the world by the end of 2012. The deadline is 1 December 2010; winners will be announced by 1 March 2011.



"Some people see unionization as devastating to the research endeavour."

Carlito Lebrilla