

A Recipe for a Successful Postdoctoral Research Symposium

Mariette Barbier*, F. Heath Damron*

Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Cancer Biology, University of Virginia

Email: fhd3x@virginia.edu

*Authors contributed equally to this work

Abstract

Within a research institution or university there is often minimal networking of the postdoctoral researchers. Postdoc associations are excellent resources, but the first step is to assemble the postdocs. In order to better organize the postdocs at the University of Virginia, we set out to put on a university-wide postdoc research day with the help of several different offices and a group of postdoc volunteers. In this paper, we describe our experiences and the outcomes, providing a blueprint that postdocs at other institutions can use to establish their own postdoc research symposiums.

As an undergraduate student you get to interact with graduate students, either in a laboratory course or when doing summer research for the first time. By observing their research lives, you can get a fairly good idea of what it takes to be a graduate student and to build a body of work to obtain a Ph.D. Most Ph.D.s will move on to some sort of postdoctoral position to obtain more training in order to achieve their goals as scientists. Yet since the game completely changes as you become a postdoc, it is not always clear what a postdoc needs to do to achieve those goals and be competitive. Graduate students often have access to career resources through graduate student offices and graduate student organizations. Even at major research institutions, the existence of postdoc associations and offices can be rare. We wondered if we, as postdocs at University of Virginia, could come together and organize in a way that would help us achieve our goals as scientists. To do this, we felt it would be necessary to first assemble together and have a research symposium. Even though we had no idea how to organize such an event from the ground up, and given that this type of event for postdocs had never been organized at UVa in the past, we knew that getting the postdocs all together would be the first step in creating a postdoc association at UVa.

Planning

We joined forces with our newly formed postdoctoral office and director. Our director had extensive administrative knowledge and advised us on the order of operations that had to be conducted. We only had two months between the initial planning and execution phase of this event, so efficiency was required for success. We needed to first form a preliminary program and use this program to identify entities within the university that would be willing to fund such an event. We then needed to recruit and organize an army of volunteer postdocs to carry out many of the tasks and execute the event. In addition to those main issues we also had to reserve a venue, organize food arrangements, print programs and shirts, send thousands of emails, etc. However, with our team (two postdoc organizers, a postdoctoral director, the Vice President of Research Office, and the army of postdoc volunteers), we were collectively able to make it all come together in the end.

In order to put together a preliminary program, we started with the idea that we wanted four main activities during the day. First, we wanted to select from a pool of submitted abstracts and have oral presentations of exciting research from all disciplines. Second, we wanted to have an engaging poster session with as many postdocs

as possible. Third, we wanted a networking session with entities from outside of UVa for the postdocs to develop connections. Lastly, we wanted a keynote address and symposium sessions which could inspire the postdocs and facilitate them working towards their goals.

Securing funding

With our preliminary plan in place, we started inquiring to various groups within the university to identify how we could obtain support. The Vice President for Research Office was quick to get behind us with tremendous support and funding. Each university has an internal set of rules and standards concerning the organization of events. These rules cover the administration of the funds, the reservation of the space to hold the event, the food provided at the gathering, permits for the distribution of alcohol on campus and additional security. The office of the VPR provided us with invaluable assistance to organize these different aspects of the event and help us adhere to UVa policies. With this initial support in hand, we used our postdoc volunteer army to solicit supplementary funds from various departments, centers for research, core facilities, etc. Our volunteers greatly expanded our outreach and were able to gather even more support. A total of \$9,900 was pledged by

various departments and centers (Figure 1). All the funds were obtained from internal UVa entities exclusively.

Putting the plan in motion

One of the objectives of the UVa postdoctoral research day was to encourage UVa postdocs to meet each other and network with members of the university and the community. We opened a call for abstract submission for postdocs to participate to the meeting by presenting a poster or an oral presentation. With 65 abstracts submitted, it seemed it would be quite a task to identify a small number of oral presentations. To do this we recruited a group of faculty and postdocs to read and evaluate the abstracts. Each abstract was reviewed by one faculty and one postdoc. The criteria sheet was designed after extensive conversations with many faculty and postdocs, during which we simply asked the question: What are the essential points of an excellent abstract? To score the abstracts we used the raw scores and also ranked them based on the range of scores that came from that reviewer to normalize the issues of some reviewers being more critical than others. This system worked well and we were able to select six outstanding presentations.

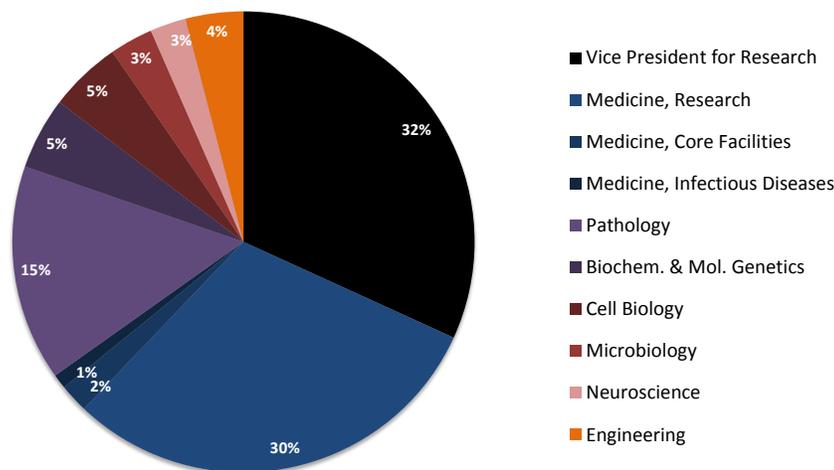


Figure 1: Percentage of the funds allocated by each sponsor. Funds for the organization of the inaugural UVa Postdoctoral Research Day were obtained from a total of 10 different sponsors.

And we are off...

Since our goal was to organize the postdoctorate at UVa, on the day of the event we began with a lunch and a presentation of the idea of forming a postdoctoral association. This message was well received and since then efforts have begun to assemble this association and make it a part of the postdoctoral experience at UVa. The six selected abstracts were then presented as oral presentations and judged by the public using a simple score card available for all the attendees.

After the oral presentations our postdoctoral director had organized an interesting symposium called, "A day in the life of...". This symposium featured Dr. Alison Criss, an assistant professor in the Department of Microbiology, Immunology, and Cancer Biology, Dr. Erik Hewlett, a professor in the Department of Infectious Diseases, Dr. Erin Cadwalader, a fellow working for American Association for Women in Science, and Dr. Kalyani Jambunathan, a research scientist at Stanford Research Institute. The idea for this symposium was to get a glimpse into a typical day of these scientists' lives. This session was followed with an open floor discussion. Overall this symposium was informative and interesting and can be used as a model for setting up similar presentations.

Our program continued with the keynote address. We wanted to invite a keynote speaker who would not come to speak about their research or product development, but rather tell an interesting story about their career and how they got to where they are today. Dr. Crystal Icenhour is the President and Chief Science Officer for Phthisis Diagnostics, a biotechnology company located in Charlottesville, VA. She was the president of the National Postdoctoral Association a few years ago and directly participated in the improvement of the postdoctoral experience across the country. She initially began her research career as a postdoc and later stepped out of academia and pursued a biotech career. Her outstanding personal and professional achievements and her national vision on the postdoctorate made her an extremely valuable keynote speaker. Her story was both fascinating and inspiring and gave hope to many of the postdocs concerning their own futures. One of her main messages was to decide what you want and go for it. However, this would mean sometimes you would have to take some risks and go outside your comfort zone.

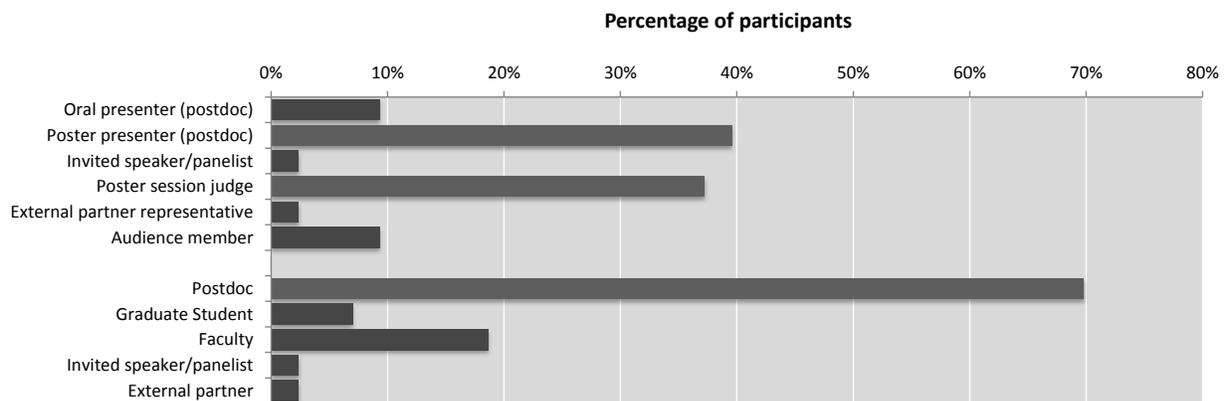


Figure 2. Distribution of the participants of the event. The event was mostly attended by postdocs, either as oral or as poster presenters. The recruitment of judges contributed greatly to the diversification of the participants.

The postdoctoral research day was concluded with a poster networking session. With such a large number of postdocs at a research institution it is easy to wonder how to get them to interact across disciplines and have a truly engaging poster session. To do this we employed a high number of judges. We asked graduate students, postdocs, and faculty to volunteer for this task. With 65 posters, we were excited to have 40 volunteer judges to go through and score the posters. Score sheets were used as a guideline, and the overall scoring system was a success.

Given the high number of judges looking at each poster, the highest scores easily stood out and facilitated the ranking. It was exciting to walk through the food and beverage area and then into the session and observe so many conversations and interactions happening. During our poster session we ran a concurrent session with outside entities with whom the postdocs could network. Local and regional biotech companies, government contract agencies, and post doc recruiters are examples of some groups that attended.

Lessons learned

The symposium was an overall success, with over 300 participants, of which the vast majority were postdocs (Figure 2). An extensive survey conducted in the months following the event helped us understand some of the mistakes that we made.

We understood that the most efficient way to get a message across the university community is either by personal interaction or by email. Physical flyers and university press prove to be highly inefficient. Most of the people who attended the event stayed for the entire day. Only 42% attended exclusively the poster and networking session. Attendees were overall very satisfied by the organization of the event and the quality of the sessions. One of our major mistakes was that with so much work to look at and interesting people to talk to, we should have increased the length of the oral and poster sessions. With the support received from our sponsors, we were able to offer exciting prizes for the best research talks and poster presentations.

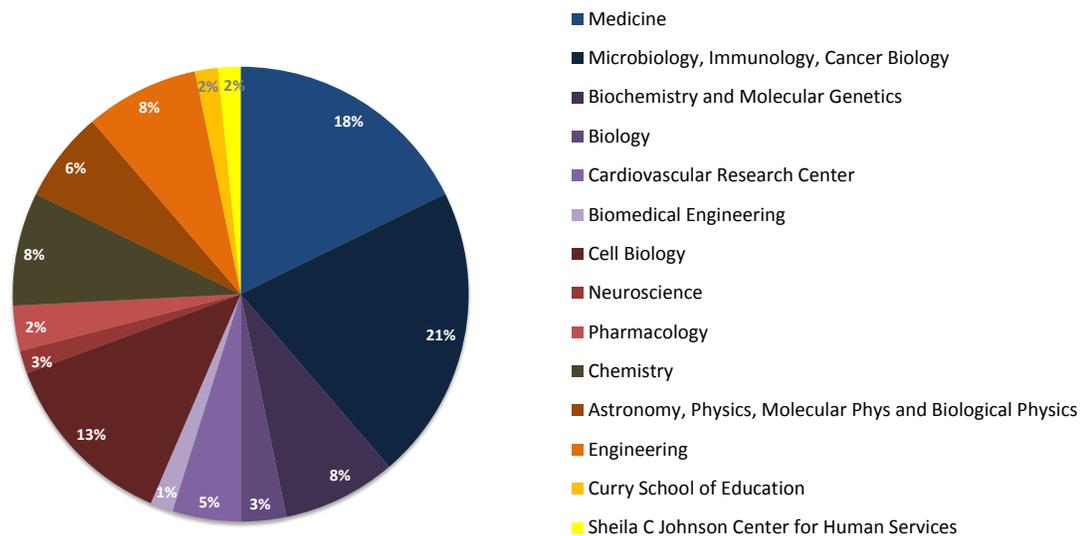


Figure 3. Distribution of the poster participation by department. The percentage of postdocs participating in the event by presenting a poster is represented here. Seventy-five percent of the participants were affiliated to biosciences.

We awarded travel awards of \$1000 and \$500 to first and second places, respectively, along with \$250 gift cards from the bookstore to the third places in each category.

One of the objectives of the event was to get postdocs from all the departments of the university involved. Despite our efforts, we could not avoid that the sessions, presentations, posters and participants were greatly biased toward the biological sciences (Figure 3). Postdocs specializing in biomedical sciences are usually a majority in institutions such as UVA and creating an event interesting to postdocs from all disciplines was a great challenge.

Overall the experience was very positive for both the organizers and attendees. It was very

interesting to get to experience the administrative side of academia and we greatly value the opportunity to gain this experience. We hope that our description of this event will inspire post docs at other institutions to assemble and put on their own postdoc research symposiums. Showcasing the strength of the postdoctoral community at UVA was an important step toward improving the support of our community by the institution. As a result of our research day, a postdoc association is being formed and gaining support from the institution. Post doc research symposiums can be used as a way to organize a postdoctorate at an institution to help each other work toward establishing ourselves as scientists.