

**VCU**

# Postdoctoral Scholars Policy and Procedures

**Policy Type:** Local

**Responsible Office:** Office of the Vice President for Research

**Initial Policy Approved:** 07/24/2007

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## Policy Statement and Purpose

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### Overview

The purpose of this document is to outline policies and procedures related to appointments, benefits, roles and responsibilities of postdoctoral scholars, faculty mentors, and the institution.

Postdoctoral scholars are an essential component of the research program at Virginia Commonwealth University. The important role postdoctoral scholars fulfill within the university is recognized, as is the institution's obligation to the training of the next generation of scientists.

The recommendations detailed within this document may require additional or complementary specification for individuals training in the health science and related professions. For this category of individuals, professional practice program requirements must not erode the research training commitment which remains the primary objective of the appointment. In the context of this document, the term "postdoctoral" does not refer to training periods in which the primary objective is the achievement of certification for added professional qualifications. Individuals pursuing clinical fellowships and residencies in the health sciences similarly are excluded from appointment to these titles, as are those who come to VCU for limited term appointments as "visiting scholars."

### BENEFITS FOR POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLARS

NOTE: Benefits associated with postdoctoral appointments are terminated when an individual is no longer a postdoctoral scholar at VCU.

#### Health Insurance

Individuals must hold appropriate health insurance coverage on appointment as a postdoctoral scholar, or as soon as possible thereafter. The conditions of appointment for scholars paid through the university must include payment/contribution toward the cost of health insurance equal to the cost of individual coverage from a designated plan offered through the Office of Postdoctoral Services. Link to health insurance information: <http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/health.htm>. This benefit should be paid as an addition to the salary/stipend level, with no deduction being made from the salary/stipend paid to

the postdoctoral scholar. Office of Postdoctoral Services will work to assure that the designated plan offered through their office is one that provides reasonable benefits and is cost effective without placing an undue burden for co-payments and deductibles on the postdoctoral scholar. This payment may be made as reimbursement to the scholar for his/her purchase of health insurance on another plan with appropriate documentation to support reimbursement and coverage. Health insurance coverage for spouse and/or dependents is generally the responsibility of the postdoctoral scholar. Payment/contribution toward the cost of health insurance is terminated when the postdoctoral scholar's appointment ends.

### **Retirement Plan Participation**

Postdoctoral scholars in the fellow classification have the option of participating in the Tax-Deferred Annuity (TDA) program, as allowed by Section 403(b) of the federal tax code. Contributions can be made with pre-tax income, with earnings accumulating on a tax-deferred basis. All postdoctoral scholars may be eligible to participate in a post-tax Roth IRA. A Roth IRA is an Individual Retirement Account that provides tax-free growth. Roth accounts can be obtained from a stockbroker, mutual fund, or other provider of "normal" investment accounts.

### **Tuition Costs**

In accordance with the provisions for unfunded scholarships Chapter 875, 2007 Acts of Assembly Section 4-2.01.b.6, full-time postdoctoral scholars may apply for tuition assistance/scholarship to defray the costs of tuition for training related courses. The scholar must submit an application for the tuition assistance/scholarship to his/her faculty mentor for approval. Final approval for the request rests with the Office of Postdoctoral Services and will be based on available funds. Full details for applying for a tuition assistance/scholarship can be found at: <http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/scholarships.htm> Postdoctoral scholar-trainees may be eligible to have tuition costs provided through their department/school as an allowable expense as described in the trainee award/grant.

### **Paid Leave Time**

The postdoctoral scholar-fellow is eligible for 20 days paid leave in each appointment year in addition to designated University holidays. These leave days can be used for any combination of vacation and sick leave. Leave is not cumulative from one appointment year to the next. Unused leave will not be paid out when the postdoctoral appointment ends. Work performed on site on University holidays may be added to paid leave by arrangement with the mentor. All leave for vacation purposes must be approved in advance by the mentor, and, if an international post-doctoral scholar, any travel outside the U.S. must be approved by VCU Immigration Services. Paid leave for the postdoctoral scholar-trainee is governed by the funding source.

### **Family and Medical Leave**

Postdoctoral scholar-fellows may be eligible for unpaid family and medical leave (FMLA) for certain family and medical reasons in accordance with Federal and State law. FMLA includes leave for birth or adoption of a child. Eligible female and male individuals who experience the birth or adoption of a child are eligible for up to 480 hours of unpaid leave provided that the mentor is notified of the intended leave period a minimum of 30 calendar days in advance. While this leave is unpaid, scholars may use paid leave time (described above) to cover leave for the birth or adoption of a child. Note that the postdoctoral scholar may be required to cover the cost of health insurance coverage during any extended leave period. For complete details about eligibility and qualifying events, please see <http://www.hr.vcu.edu/payroll-and-leave/leave/family-and-medical-leave/> Family and medical leave for the postdoctoral scholar-trainee is governed by the funding source.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLARS AND MENTORS**

### **Responsibility of Postdoctoral Scholar**

Postdoctoral scholars have certain obligations to their mentor, the group in which they are working, the department/school with which they are associated, the sponsor whose funds support them, and the University. These obligations include but are not limited to: (i) the conscientious discharge of their assigned duties; (ii) conformity with ethical standards in research and scholarship; (iii) compliance with good scholarly practice including the maintenance of adequate research records; (iv) observation of appropriate guidelines regarding human subjects, animal subjects and biohazards; (v) open and timely discussion with their mentor regarding possession or distribution of tangible property such as materials, reagents and the like; (vi) discussion of laboratory records or scholarly materials, if relevant; (vii) prior disclosure of appropriate scholarly information, findings or techniques proposed for dissemination privately, at scholarly meetings, or in publications; (viii) collegial conduct towards coworkers and members of the academic or research group; (ix) compliance with all applicable University and Office of Research policies; (x) and following all immigration regulations.

### **Responsibility of Mentor**

Mentors' responsibilities include: (i) developing in consultation with the postdoctoral scholar a mutually satisfactory research project or scholarly program; (ii) encouraging postdoctoral scholars to present their work, and to publish their results in a timely fashion; (iii) encouraging postdoctoral scholars to acquire and enhance their knowledge and technical skills as dictated by their current and future needs; (iv) arrangement and oversight of teaching opportunities as appropriate to their discipline and program; (v) encouraging postdoctoral scholars to apply for training and research support as appropriate; (vi) meeting regularly with their postdoctoral scholars to discuss progress in their research; (vii) providing an annual review of performance based upon written mutually agreed expectations of progress and performance; (viii) insuring that postdoctoral scholars are aware of University policies regarding postdoctoral training, and are instructed about research policies of the University; (ix) providing career counseling.

### **Responsible Conduct of Research**

Within 1 year of their appointment, all postdoctoral scholars must provide to the Office of Postdoctoral Services verification of having completed an approved educational program in responsible conduct of research. Information about approved programs can be found at

[http://www.research.vcu.edu/responsible\\_conduct/rcr\\_courses.pdf](http://www.research.vcu.edu/responsible_conduct/rcr_courses.pdf)

### **Research Records**

Primary research records created by postdoctoral scholars during the period of their appointment are the property of Virginia Commonwealth University. All such records are retained by the University on departure of the individual. Subject to the approval of the mentor, copies of the records may be made and taken by the postdoctoral scholar. Postdoctoral scholars should be familiar with the university policy on research data

<http://www.assurance.vcu.edu/Policy%20Library/Research%20Data%20Ownership,%20Retention%20&%20Access.pdf>

### **Intellectual property**

The University retains all rights, title, and interest in any and all intellectual property generated, created, or developed in facilities operated or controlled by the University, supported by funds administered by

the University, and/or performed in the course of regular duties by University members, including postdoctoral scholars, unless exempted by other provisions of this policy. It is the responsibility of the postdoctoral scholar to be familiar with VCU's intellectual property policy

<http://www.assurance.vcu.edu/Policy%20Library/Intellectual%20Property%20Policy.pdf>

### **Application for Grants**

VCU allows postdoctoral scholars to apply for grants as a Principal Investigator, however state policy stipulates that only those who are employees of the institution (i.e., receive salaries, not stipends) can be a Principal Investigator at the time a grant is awarded. Each school should set a policy describing the rights of postdoctoral Scholars to apply for grants as a Principal Investigator. If the university and school policy permits such applications, it is suggested that there be a requirement for review and approval by a knowledgeable tenured faculty member as well as the usual approval by department chair and dean. If the Scholar is not an employee at the time of application (i.e., they are a Scholar-Trainee), before the proposal will be approved for submission by the Office of Sponsored Programs the department chair will be required to provide a letter stating that the individual will be placed in an appropriate position (salaried) should an award be made.

### **IRB and IACUC Submissions**

VCU policy stipulates that postdoctoral scholars are not eligible to be the Principle Investigator on IRB and most IACUC applications. Detail on this policy is available on the Office of Research Website:

<http://www.research.vcu.edu/>

### **Ombudsperson Services**

Postdoctoral scholars are eligible to use the services of VCU's Faculty/Staff Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson provides confidential, informal, impartial, and independent assistance to faculty, staff, and postdoctoral scholars who experience position-related conflict. The Ombudsperson listens to complaints, provides information, facilitates communication, and helps arrange mediation or conflict resolution between or among members of VCU's faculty, staff, and post-doctoral scholars. Information about the Ombudsperson can be found at: <http://www.provost.vcu.edu/ombuds/>

## **TRAINING OF POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLARS**

### **Orientation**

A compendium of information will be made available to each postdoctoral scholar upon arrival at the University through the Office of Research website. This compendium will include a copy of these policies and procedures, conflict of interest and financial disclosure policies

(<http://www.assurance.vcu.edu/Policy%20Library/Conflict%20of%20Interests%20in%20Research.pdf>),

intellectual property policies (<http://www.ts.vcu.edu/policies/ippolicy.html>), VCU Policies and procedures for Misconduct in Research and Scholarly Activities

(<http://www.assurance.vcu.edu/Policy%20Library/Misconduct%20in%20Research%20and%20Scholarly%20Activities.pdf>), sexual harassment policies

(<http://www.assurance.vcu.edu/Policy%20Library/Prohibition%20Against%20Sexual%20Harassment.pdf>

), parking policies, a clear statement about benefits, the current Commonwealth, and Federal taxation policies, sources of information within the University, and explanation of the ombudsperson services available at <http://www.vcu.edu/provost/>. Mentors are responsible for assuring that postdoctoral scholars are provided with any unit-level orientation materials. Preferably, periodic orientation sessions should be provided for all new postdoctoral scholars at the department level.

### Training Program Elements

Postdoctoral scholars are considered to be professionals in training. One goal of their professional experience at VCU is to be provided training relevant to the responsible conduct of research. Such training should include the following elements, as appropriate to the individual trainee: (1) data management, ownership of intellectual property and tangible research materials; (ii) mentor/trainee responsibilities; (iii) publication practices and responsible authorship; (iv) peer review; (v) rights of collaborators; (vi) human subject research; (vii) research involving animals; (viii) research misconduct; (ix) conflict of interest; and (x) compliance with existing Federal and University policies. As noted previously, within 1 year of their appointment, all postdoctoral scholars must provide to the Office of Postdoctoral Services verification of having completed an approved educational program in responsible conduct of research. When postdoctoral scholars engage in teaching, appropriate training and didactic experience should also be provided.

### Policy Exceptions

Unless otherwise stipulated, requests for exceptions to any of these policies must be submitted by the faculty mentor, and reviewed and approved by the department chair and/or the dean of the school/college. Documentation of exceptions should be submitted to the Office of Postdoctoral Services.

Noncompliance with this policy may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination. VCU supports and environment free from retaliation. Retaliation against any employee who brings forth a good faith concern, asks a clarifying question, or participates in an investigation is prohibited.

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## Who Should Know This Policy

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Postdoctoral scholars, and all faculty and administrative personnel who are involved in the recruitment, appointment, or training of postdoctoral scholars

## Definitions ---

### **Postdoctoral Scholar**

At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) a postdoctoral scholar is an individual who comes to VCU for the purpose of entering an advanced research training period following receipt of the Ph.D. or appropriate first professional degree (e.g. M.D.) This training period is conducted under the mentorship and supervision of an established member of the VCU faculty who is at the Assistant Professor level or above. Research training should be the primary objective, but the specific program may include activity in one or a combination of research, teaching and service activities directed to enhancing the career development of the individual. While the specific nature of each individual program may vary, each must incorporate appropriate opportunities to foster research skills and the career development of the individual. Postdoctoral scholars are appointed at VCU for fixed terms (typically of one year's duration each), that generally do not total more than 3-5 years.

## Contacts ---

The Office of the Vice President for Research officially interprets this policy. Please direct policy questions to the Office of the Vice President for Research.

## Procedures ---

### **Proof of Doctoral Degree**

Individuals are to submit documentation to the department/unit hiring official that the Ph.D. or first professional degree has been awarded or that all degree requirements have been fulfilled prior to appointment. Candidates from institutions outside the U.S. must hold advanced degrees which are equivalent to those awarded by U.S. institutions to qualify for appointment. An original transcript or diploma documenting the awarding of the degree must be available for review at the time of appointment. Graduates of U.S. institutions who have completed all degree requirements but have not been formally awarded the degree may be hired as a postdoctoral scholar provided written verification that all degree requirements have been completed from the appropriate *institutional* office of the degree-awarding institution is submitted. Once the transcript or diploma documenting the formal awarding of the degree is available, a copy must be made available to the department/unit hiring official, and other university offices that may require proof of receipt of the degree (e.g., the Global Education Office).

### **Terms of Appointment**

Postdoctoral scholars normally are appointed on a full-time basis. Requests for time limited reductions in effort and pay due to temporary family or other conditions must be reviewed and approved by the department chair and/or dean. Any reductions in effort may also require a signed waiver of certain benefits and privileges. Changes in the terms of appointment and/or benefits must be made in writing to the postdoctoral scholar with a copy submitted to the Office of Postdoctoral Services, and to the Global Education Office for international postdoctoral scholars.

The potential duration of an appointment will be noted in the initial letter of appointment. Appointments generally are made on an annual basis with the potential for renewal, if appropriate, based on satisfactory progress, performance, programmatic need, and availability of funding. Postdoctoral appointments should not exceed a total of five years for all combined years of institutional training. In cases of combined training, only the years of active research at the postdoctoral level will be counted for salary and other purposes. Postdoctoral scholars are typically appointed at VCU for a total of no more than three to five years. Exceptions to extend the appointment beyond 5 years may be made in one year increments with permission of the Department/School. Examples of reasons for exceptions might include postdoctoral scholars who begin a second postdoctoral appointment in a new field; postdoctoral scholars who are on a training grant that extends beyond the five-year period and the agency sponsor allows a longer postdoctoral training appointment period; or those who request an extension due to a leave of absence. Notification of extensions must be provided to the Office of Postdoctoral Services.

**Note:** International postdoctoral scholars may have visa restrictions that limit the length of their time in the United States. All proposed extensions of appointments for international postdoctoral scholars require prior consultation with the Office of International Education and approval by the appropriate institutional office and/or federal agency during its term, an appointment is contingent upon satisfactory performance and the availability of funding. At the end of the term and subject to any limits, the appointment may be eligible for renewal, based on satisfactory progress, performance, the existence of funding, and programmatic need.

#### **General Information Regarding Appointment Processing**

Individuals interested in applying for postdoctoral study at VCU should make their inquiries directly to the faculty mentor or academic department or school in which they are seeking appointment. The title of a Postdoctoral Scholar appointment is determined by the source of funding for the appointment:

##### **Postdoctoral Scholar – Fellow**

An appointment is made to the title “Postdoctoral Scholar – Fellow” when (1) the agency funding the salary requires or permits the appointee to be classified as an employee of the University, or (2) whenever General Funds, or other University funds are used to support the position. Fellows are typically employed to work and train with faculty on the faculty member’s research project.

##### **Postdoctoral Scholar –Trainee**

An appointment is made to the title “Postdoctoral Scholar –Trainee” when the Postdoctoral Scholar has been awarded a fellowship or traineeship for postdoctoral study by an extramural agency and the fellowship or traineeship is paid through a University account, but not through the university Human Resources payroll system. Trainees receive a stipend to pursue an individually defined training program.

##### **Postdoctoral Scholar – Affiliate**

An appointment is made to the title “Postdoctoral Scholar – Affiliate” when the postdoctoral scholar has been awarded a fellowship or traineeship for postdoctoral study by an extramural/external agency/organization and the extramural/external agency/organization pays the fellowship or traineeship directly to the postdoctoral scholar, rather than through the University. Such appointments shall have a “without salary”

status.

### **Conditions of Appointment**

As a condition of their appointment at VCU, all postdoctoral scholars are subject to all applicable policies and procedures of the University. Significant policies and procedures include, but are not limited to, conflict of interests, intellectual property and code of ethics. It is the responsibility of the Scholar to be aware of these policies and procedures as well as all others which may apply to them. Also, in the course of their employment Scholars may have access to confidential information regarding employees, students, patients, the public, or to proprietary or other confidential information belonging to or in the possession of VCU. This information is to remain confidential, and may be disclosed only in strict accordance with federal or state law and/or University Regulations and policy.

The offer of appointment is also conditional upon job related background checks and the Scholar's consent to a criminal history records check. Criminal conviction investigations also will be conducted in connection with certain transfers and promotions as described within the Criminal Conviction Investigation policy. As required by state law, the offer is conditional upon U.S. citizens verifying that they have registered for the Selective Service or providing documentation from the Selective Service System that their requirement to register has been "terminated or become inapplicable." VCU is required by state law to ask each new employee (i.e., Scholar-Fellow) if he/she has an income withholding order for child support payments. An affirmative response will not adversely affect the Scholar's employment with Virginia Commonwealth University. A U.S. Department of Justice I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification also must be completed on or before the date employment begins.

### **Letter of Appointment**

The faculty mentor and/or department chair are responsible for sending an offer letter to the scholar. The letter offering appointment as a postdoctoral scholar must be communicated to the candidate prior to the commencement of duties by the scholar after consultation with the administrative office of the unit in which the appointment will be effected. The letter must set forth the basic terms of the appointment including the intended overall period of appointment (including the provision of the annual required renewal of the appointment), the compensation level, health insurance benefits, leave time, other included benefits, the requirement that responsible conduct of research training must be completed within 12 months of the appointment, and a statement that the appointment is subject to University and Office of Research policies. The letter must include a statement that all benefits associated with the postdoctoral appointment terminate when the appointment ends. The letter must indicate whether funding for the period of the intended appointment is secure; if not, the duration of secure funding must be noted. If the appointment is dependent on extramural funding, this must be communicated in the letter of appointment. The end date for the current award must be indicated even if a renewal of the award is anticipated. If an appointment is renewed or extended, a letter documenting the renewal of the appointment containing the information as described above must be provided to the individual. The letter must also include a general description of the project and/or activities on which the postdoctoral scholar initially is to be involved, and should note that an annual review of the progress of the postdoctoral scholar will be undertaken. Appointment and renewal letters must include a signature line for the candidate to confirm acceptance of the terms of the offer of appointment. The candidate must return a countersigned copy of the letter to the unit in which the appointment is effected. Sample appointment letters (trainee and fellow) can be accessed at:

[http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/appointment\\_letter.htm](http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/appointment_letter.htm).



**Note:** The Global Education Office must be notified if the appointment dates or regular duties change for international postdoctoral scholars.

### **Appointment Processing of Postdoctoral Scholars**

Departments/schools must forward all postdoctoral appointment papers to the Office of Postdoctoral Services in advance of, or concurrent with, the proposed start date for the appointment. Appointment papers include:

- Applicant's CV or resume
- A copy of the appointment letter signed by the applicant accepting the position
- PAF or a copy of the purchase order and a Post Doctoral Payment Schedule as appropriate for the Scholar-Fellow and Scholar-Trainee.

### **Appointment Processing of International Postdoctoral Scholars**

When appointing an international postdoctoral scholar, the department/school must follow procedures defined by the Immigration Services office of the Global Education Office. This office is the University office authorized to issue documents which permit the individual to apply for an appropriate visa.

Procedures are described in the Immigration Services Office website at the following link:

<http://global.vcu.edu/students/immigration/index.html> If the source of funding or terms of appointment change, the sponsoring department/school/mentor must immediately inform VCU Immigration Services.

### **Appointment Processing of Postdoctoral Scholar - Fellow**

Upon receipt and review by the Office of Postdoctoral Services, the appropriate employment paperwork (including PAF) will be forwarded to Human Resources for the postdoctoral scholar - fellow to be paid as an employee of the university.

### **Appointment Processing of Postdoctoral Scholar – Trainee**

Upon receipt and review by the Office of Postdoctoral Services, a copy of the purchase order and a Post-Doctoral Payment Schedule will be sent to Accounts Payable for a postdoctoral scholar/trainee.

### **Appointment Processing of Postdoctoral Scholar – Affiliate**

Departments/schools should forward CV/resume and letter of appointment to the Office of Postdoctoral Services, and enter the appropriate data on the postdoctoral scholar-affiliate into the University's Affiliate database in Banner...

### **Compensation Level**

Starting salaries/stipends for all postdoctoral scholars, regardless of their source of funding, are expected to meet the minimum standards set annually by the Office of Postdoctoral Services. Link to VCU salary information: <http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/salary.htm>. A department/school may establish a higher minimum salary/stipend level for postdoctoral scholars paid within that school. Each department/school should establish compensation levels based on experience and the usual standards for payment of postdoctoral scholars/trainees in the relevant discipline.

### **Postdoctoral Scholar Notice of Resignation**

When a postdoctoral scholar chooses to resign from the position prior to the end of an appointment period, a minimum of one month's notice is expected. The postdoctoral scholar has an obligation to ensure that all materials and records related to research are left in a state to allow continuation of the

project. No original materials or records of the project may be removed by the postdoctoral scholar. It is the responsibility of the faculty mentor to discuss this institutional policy with the scholar. Notice of the resignation of a postdoctoral scholar must be forwarded to the department/school and the Office of Postdoctoral Services, and, if an international scholar, to the Global Education Office.

#### **Termination of the Appointment:**

Mentors may terminate appointees *during an appointment period* if specific and compelling factors warrant termination. Postdoctoral scholars should generally be given a 30 day notice of termination. Termination of an appointment must be communicated in writing to the postdoctoral scholar with a copy forwarded to the department/school and the Office of Postdoctoral Services, and, if an international scholar, to the Global Education Office. To appeal this decision, the scholar should follow department/school grievance procedures. If there are no procedures, she/he should contact the Office of Postdoctoral Services.

#### **Evaluation of Postdoctoral Scholars:**

The faculty mentor of a postdoctoral scholar must complete an annual written evaluation of the scholar's performance. The evaluation process should be based on expectations that have been established for the postdoctoral scholar and on his/her progress toward overall career goals. These expectations should be developed in writing with the postdoctoral scholar at the beginning of the appointment period, with opportunity for review and revision as the appointment progresses. The evaluation process should include the opportunity for the scholar to respond in writing to the evaluation. Examples of potential evaluation forms can be found at the following link: <http://www.research.vcu.edu/postdoc/evaluation.htm>. A copy of the evaluation form should be maintained in the departmental/school personnel file of the postdoctoral scholar. The Office of Postdoctoral Services will conduct an exit interview/survey with postdoctoral scholars. The objectives of the interview include obtaining input about their experiences at VCU, solicitation of suggestions for improving the working environment of postdoctoral scholars at the university and documenting the position in which the individual will be employed on leaving the postdoctoral appointment.

## **Forms**

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There are no forms associated with this policy and procedures.

## **Related Documents**

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1. Intellectual Properties Policy
2. Office of Research Conflict of Interest Policy
3. Policies and Procedures for Misconduct in Research and Scholarly Activities
4. Office of Research Policy on Research Data
5. IRB and IACUC Written Policies and Procedures

## 6. VCU Policies Relevant to Research

### Revision History

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This policy supersedes the following archived policies:

July 24, 2007

*Postdoctoral Scholars Policy and Procedures*

### FAQs

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There are no FAQs associated with this policy and procedures.