

Supplemental Text. Information is excerpts from emails to us asking for clarification on the data presented in Fig. S1.

## **No response – the institution didn't respond to our request for information**

Brown University

California Institute of Technology

University of California, Los Angeles

## **No information – institution does not have records to confirm or refute GSS data**

Augusta University/Georgia Health Sciences University

"I cannot speak directly to the numbers" ... "however I do not think there have been any policy changes"

Colorado State University, Fort Collins:

"I can't explain the number change"

"I think we need to assume that the [2000] number was underreported and that we are unlikely to know why or by how much. The rest of the graph, however, is pretty much what I would expect."

Northwestern University:

*Referred us to NCSES for information on the data.*

Oregon Health & Science University:

"Since the data precedes my time at OHSU, I'll need to look deeper into it."

SUNY, University at Buffalo

"I suspect that there have been changes overtime on how biological science and health sciences have been reported. This may result from internal reporting changes or the pre-2007 classification system used by NSF."

Tufts University

"I think it is extremely hard to tell what the data mean from so long ago. My own guess is that it relates to a difference in the reporting."

"My guess is that in earlier counts, someone omitted a cadre of postdocs some place in the university and these individuals were added back in the year you mentioned as opposed to the population actually expanding – that said – there is probably no real way to know – Tufts did not accurately track postdocs until the past decade – or at least that is my view."

University of California, Davis

"I can't speak directly to the inflection point in the [1998-2002 period] that your graph indicates."

University of California, San Francisco (2000)

"...don't really know why there is such a big dip from 2000-2003 and I'm a bit skeptical that it is accurate."

University of Florida

"[15 years ago] a lot of things were on paper and staff have changed so we may not be able to determine things given the history of the information."

"We do not have any written documentation that far back, but [human resources] did see what was submitted and confirmed it. We just can't explain it."

University of Massachusetts Medical School

"The explanation for the overage on the reported/recorded numbers is unclear."

"I suspect there has either been an error in reporting by UMMS or in recording the reported data."

University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, The:

"We are unable to provide additional information regarding the data from 1996 through 2000. None of us was affiliated with trainee data during the years of the GSS reports in question, nor do we have access to the staff members that were here during that period of time."

University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, The

"There was limited oversight and uniformity to who was 'a postdoc.' I would guess there was a liberal definition of who was really a postdoc at UTSW prior to 2005 and data missing for any who were 'paid-direct.'"

University of Virginia

"I've heard back from two departments. No one can tell me why there were such a large drop in [one] or why [another] went up. The closest I got was maybe we lost faculty in [one], or maybe we got more grant money in [another]."

## **Data discrepancy – institutional information on postdoc population are not recognized in GSS data**

Case Western Reserve University:

"We are unsure where your numbers came from"

"I do not have a lot of data from that time-frame"

"The drop in numbers is suspect, as we have had a fairly stable postdoc population over the years"

"This looks to be an error in whoever was reporting these data to you at the time."

Dartmouth College

"I have no idea where you got this data"

"[I know we have over 200 across Dartmouth], but do not have a specific number, or specifics as to where they are at this point."

"In any case, it looks to me that your numbers are off by quite a bit."

Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

"It's not always easy to isolate postdoctoral scholars in the Life Sciences for MIT."

"We have pretty good data back to 1981, and very good data for the past 20 years."

Thomas Jefferson University:

"I don't think this data is accurate at all."

"I checked with my co-worker who collects the data and we're perplexed by the chart you sent."

"I'm confident that the data we have provided since 2003 (if not before then) is accurate, but it's not the same data shown on the chart you sent."

University of California, Riverside

"It is the departments that submit the data and I have no idea why the data drops so significantly [in 2009]."

"My best guess is that in that particular year, the data was either not submitted or not aggregated properly. There was a bit of a spike in total postdocs from 2008 to 2009 and then a dip in 2010 but not to the degree it shows on the chart."

University of California, San Francisco (2012)

"...can confidently say that there was no major change in the number of postdocs from 2006-present. The monthly snapshot number is virtually always between 1,000 and 1,100."

"...may have been some confusion about categorizing between biological sciences vs health sciences."

University of Maryland, Baltimore

"I have to say that I am confused. I spoke with the person who has been in charge of GSS data for our graduate students. She began in her position in 2006, and was of the understanding that no data for postdocs had been gathered before she started. She started gathering data around 2012 and has worked with our office to make sure that it is accurate since then."

"I'm looking at the numbers in the more recent years, and I think this data is entirely wrong."

"I believe that we've been at a steady state of this number for approximately 5 years, so I'm sorry to say that this data doesn't reflect the number of postdocs here on our campus at all."

"The data that I know, which is not for very many years back, does not match the GSS data. Therefore, I don't have any information to explain the fluctuations in the GSS data."

University of Tennessee, The Health Science Center

"2007 – 2008 there were 147 postdocs total; 2008 – 2009 there were 172 postdocs total; 2009 – 2010 there were 140 postdocs total. We do not have information for 2006-2007, since the Postdoc Office was not in existence at that time."

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, The:

"The numbers in the GSS do not reflect what they have reported since 2010. As for the data prior to 2010, it's anyone's guess."

Yeshiva University

"At a glance, the graph does not appear to accurately reflect the number of postdoctoral fellows in the biomedical sciences at Einstein."

"I suspect that you realize that the raw data and tally sheets and such from 16 years ago will be difficult to jump into."

"I do not believe the graph reflects the number of postdoctoral fellows in the biomedical sciences at Einstein."

**Policy change – institutions changed methods to track and report postdocs**

North Carolina State University:

"Based on the records that I was able to retrieve and reconstruct, the significant changes in reported post-docs for Biological Sciences, that you referenced, are a result of multiple internal protocol changes involved with generating these reports as opposed to being a result of actual extreme shifts in the population. NSF does not provide specific standards for categorizing post-docs, so interpretations related to what populations to include, as well as, how to classify them, have changed over the many years represented in your analysis. Additionally, the responsible University unit for producing this report has changed over the years."

SUNY, Stony Brook University

"One potential trend I might believe in those data is the drop off after 2003, which corresponds to the year that SBU instituted its first term limit policy on postdoc."

University of California, San Francisco (2004)

"...the spike between 2003 - 2004 can be explained by having the new title codes and more accurate information."