Since assuming office about three years ago, University of California (UC) President Janet Napolitano has had postdocs on her radar. In fact, she is the only UC President to consistently address the UC postdoc population in her public speaking engagements. UC Berkeley’s Visiting Scholar and Postdoc Affairs Director, Sam Castañeda, and I took a trip to the UC systems’ headquarters in Oakland to meet with President Napolitano, and find out a little more about how she sees postdocs and what she thinks may be in store for them in the University’s future plans.

President Napolitano says she considers postdocs essential to the intellectual underpinning of the entire UC system. In addition to what they bring to the University’s research capacity, she values their diversity, as they come from the UC system, from the nation, and around the world. She also views the postdoc and visiting scholar community as an important source of future faculty.

President Napolitano spoke about the President’s Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, which enables her office to recruit from colleges with highly diverse student bodies like the historically black colleges and universities.

“Great resource for students and postdocs, better than last year!”; “Great speakers, great organization! I learned a lot and had a great time.” No, these are not words of excitement created by the hype traditionally surrounding Apple’s product launches, but the feedback from graduate students and postdocs attending this year’s Beyond Academia (BA) conference.

Have you ever felt isolated or alone in your search for what comes after your PhD or postdoc? Have you wondered about non-academic careers, but didn’t know where to begin? Beyond Academia is a student-run conference that brings together PhDs and professionals from all backgrounds to explore career options for PhDs in a supportive and informative environment. In the words of an attendee, “I found it reassuring to be in a room full of smart people in my position -- expressing similar anxieties, looking toward similar futures, learning about people who have successfully moved from academia to industry… throughout the conference, I was reminded of interesting opportunities, and reassured I am well-positioned to pursue them.”

Medical Plans are No Longer Considered Grandfathered

As many of you know, the passing and subsequent implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) required insurance companies and employers to include many changes to the benefits offered. Employers with plans that met most of the requirements could choose to stay “grandfathered,” meaning that as long as the plan didn’t change the benefits or the employee contribution significantly, the plan didn’t need to meet all of the new requirements. The PSBP has been enhanced for 2016.

PSBP | POSTDOCTORAL SCHOLAR BENEFITS PLAN
ENHANCEMENTS FOR 2016

If you were unable to attend one of the open enrollment meetings or webinars in November 2015, the benefit changes for the 2016 plan year are listed below. A number of revisions were made that will enhance an already very comprehensive benefit program.
QUESTION:
Dear Adam,
I am a postdoc currently at UC Los Angeles with a J-1 visa. My same-sex fiancée, Gretta, accompanied me to California. Because we are not married yet, my “to-be-wife” accompanied me to Los Angeles with a B-2 tourist visa which ended three months ago. For your information, the B-2 visa stamp in her passport has a notation of “single entry”. Prior to the ending date of the B-2 tourist visa, we submitted an extension request for more time, but have not heard back yet.

Because my fiancée needs to go back to Germany to take her qualifying examination, I asked my visa counselor what to do. To this regard, I was informed that the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration can take up to several more months to get back with their decision to extend the visa or not. I was also informed that Gretta is totally legal while we wait for the answer. But as indicated to you earlier, she needs to go back to Germany and wants to come back to California after her qualifying examination.

Coincidentally, my friend from Italy had the exact same issue. When his “to-be-husband”, Giorgio, went to Italy for personal reasons, he left the country without the extension being confirmed. In Rome, he was allowed to board his flight back to Los Angeles. When he arrived, he was interviewed by a Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration officer. At that time, Giorgio informed him that the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration never got back to him with regard to his extension request. He further explained that he had to go home for personal reasons and the officer made no problem for him thereby allowing him a re-entry with an outdated, single entry B-2 visa.

OK. Since my friend had no problem with the exact same circumstances, should I let Gretta go back to Germany and take my chances that the port of entry officer will let her come back too? Please help me. I am so confused with the U.S. immigration regulations. Thank you.

Best wishes,
Inge

ANSWER
Dear Inge,
I am so sorry about the slowness of the immigration adjudication of Gretta’s application to extend her stay in the U.S. In fact, when a person departs the U.S. during the pendency of a B2 visa extension, the application is automatically withdrawn. However, since she applied for the extension of her stay during its validity period, she was legally awaiting the decision. I would recommend that she retain the receipt as it serves as evidence that she filed for the extension in a timely manner.

If Gretta is from a “Visa Waiver” country, such as Germany, then she can probably return for another 90 day period. Each time she attempts to make the entry to the U.S., she must establish that she is coming for a period up to 90 days. If the airport inspector does not believe that she is coming for a temporary period, Gretta will be denied entry and returned to Europe.

However, if you marry Gretta, then she will be eligible for a J2 visa and work permission. Now, an unmarried partner may be eligible for a B2 tourist visa that is only issued at a U.S. consulate. This is a relatively new policy that will permit Gretta to continue to extend her tourist stay beyond the normal limited periods so that she may remain with you. This policy also applies to grandparents who are coming to be with their family. It is recommended that Gretta bring to the U.S. consulate interview proof that you have resided together as partners as well as your DS 2019 and postdoc contract with UCLA.

As for your friend, Giorgio, it is possible that his friend had a friendly U.S. immigration officer at the airport. If he was from a Visa Waiver country, then he was admitted for 90 days and it does not matter that he had an expired B2 tourist visa in his passport. I would never count on that occurring for Gretta or anyone else.

Sincerely,
Adam Green

The Law Offices of Adam Green specializes in representation of postdoctoral scholars, especially their particular immigration issues including H visas, E visas, green cards and J visa waivers. If you have questions regarding the above information, obtaining work permission, or green cards, Adam is available for a free chat via email at adamgreen@earthlink.net. You may also call him at 323-852-6135.

INVITATION TO SUBMIT:
The UC Postdoc Newsletter invites contributions from any UC postdoc, as well as administrators, faculty, or other UC personnel who want to share a story, viewpoint, piece of advice, or inquiry with others in the postdoctoral community. Please submit your written piece, question, or idea, to vspa@berkeley.edu or contact us with questions.
Meet William Tucker
Interim Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies

The UC Postdoc Newsletter met with Dr. William Tucker, Interim Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies at the University of California Office of the President (UCOP), to talk about his view of postdocs in the UC system. Tucker is no stranger to the postdoc experience. He is a microbiologist who was a postdoc at Stanford University and the Australian National University. Tucker’s career, however, quickly transitioned into the private sector after the completion of his postdoctoral training. He began a career trajectory that has seen him in environments such as intellectual property management, agricultural biotechnology, applied biosystems, and business acquisitions. In the end, Tucker came to UCOP as a licensing officer, a position he held prior to becoming Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies in 2014.

How does Tucker see his role as Vice President? He sees it as essentially supporting “the research enterprise writ large,” where postdocs comprise one major element of that enterprise, while faculty members and graduate students comprise the other two. Tucker speaks positively of the postdoc experience at UC. The “postdoc experience,” he says, “is essential in either being a successful faculty member or a very productive researcher in an industry context.” It is a time in a researcher’s career “when you get to do nothing but research,” where you identify areas of research you can pursue as a faculty member in a context free from the grant-writing responsibilities that take up so much of a faculty member’s time. Because of the significance of postdoc training for postdocs’ future careers and the innovative research they produce, Tucker believes that “it’s important we recognize the value of postdocs and that the university can be as responsive to their needs as possible.”

What career advice does Tucker offer to postdocs? He suggests that postdocs should reflect on where they are and where they want to be in their career when they begin (or ideally, before they begin) their training. In particular, Tucker believes that postdocs should be aware of the multiple career options that are available to them given their specific research background. He suggests that, if possible, researchers who have submitted their Ph.D. dissertations and are waiting for a decision should take the free time that this period provides them to seriously consider what they want to do in their lives - before they embark on a postdoc or any other training scheme. Thus, those who choose to become postdocs would have a better idea about the ways in which the postdoc training could contribute to their overall career goals.

Considered “grandfathered” until January 1, 2016 when the University decided to voluntarily drop the “grandfathered” status. Because the plan was already so comprehensive, it didn’t have a huge impact on the benefits. The main changes to the plans are all positive. Preventive care, such as well-woman and routine physical examinations will now be free of charge. In addition, contraceptives will also be no cost to the members.

MDLIVE

MDLIVE is a new service offered through both the medical HMO and PPO plans, operating as an online telemedicine program. MDLIVE doctors are available by phone or video 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and are able to diagnose and help treat any non-emergency medical conditions.

Postdoc Plan Contributions Remain the Same or Reduced for 2016

The PPO medical plan contributions will remain the same, while the HMO plan contributions are slightly less. If you saw a slight reduction in your monthly deductions from your paycheck, this is the reason.

Voluntary Supplemental Life and AD&D Insurance

All postdocs are automatically enrolled in $50,000 of life and accidental death/dismemberment (AD&D) insurance on the first day they start working at the University. However, with so many young families, many postdocs asked if they could purchase additional life insurance. Starting January 1, 2016, postdocs are now able to purchase life and AD&D insurance up to an additional $150,000. Dependents can be enrolled for $5,000 of life insurance. This additional life insurance is voluntary, which means it is paid 100% by the postdoc.

Dental Plans

Although there were a number of minor plan changes for both the HMO and POS dental plans, the biggest change was regarding the major coverage under the POS EPO tier. The coinsurance changed from 50% to 40% for major procedures if the member utilizes the EPO tier. This means less out-of-pocket costs when a major procedure is needed such as a crown or root canal.

Summary

As you can see, there were a number of positive changes for plan year 2016. If you need more information regarding these changes or have any questions, please visit the PSBP website at www.garnett-powers.com/postdoc. You may also call Garnett-Powers & Associates toll-free at 800-254-1758, or email psbp@garnett-powers.com.
The fourth annual BA conference at UC Berkeley was held on March 14-15, 2016. The conference helps graduate students and postdocs explore multiple career paths and is planned by a grassroots team of PhD students and postdocs on behalf of their peers. BA was founded in 2012 by UC Berkeley graduate students in response to both the poor academic job market for PhDs and the limited career resources available to them. The next year, founders of BA and other volunteers launched their first conference featuring more than 40 speakers, most of whom had made the transition from the academic to the professional world. More than 100 students attended. In the following years, the size of the conference grew to 250 students and expanded to serve PhDs from all disciplines including the humanities and social sciences (HSS) as well as those from STEM fields.

BA differs from traditional career events and career fairs in many ways. Firstly, it specifically targets graduate students and postdocs, a highly motivated and high-achieving group of people that is not often the focus of campus career events. Secondly, it helps graduate students prepare for a career path outside of the academic world - to recognize what they are good at, how their skills can be transferred outside of the tenure track, and how to present these skills in a manner that is attractive to companies, non-profits, public institutions and other organizations outside the academic realm. Finally, the conference provides the opportunity for attendees to network with keynote speakers, panelists and workshop leaders, many of whom have made the transition from academia to multiple career paths themselves. In sum, the BA conference allows graduate students and postdocs to take a step back and examine their career options, and provides tools to take steps toward achieving their dream careers.

This year’s sold-out BA conference hosted over 300 attendees and featured nearly 100 professionals, including keynote speakers Nils Gilman, the Associate Chancellor at UC Berkeley, and Vivienne Ming, entrepreneur and theoretical neuroscientist named by Inc. Magazine as one of “Ten Women to Watch in Tech in 2013.” While the previous BA conferences focused mainly on graduate students and postdocs from STEM fields, BA 2016 featured workshops on transferrable skills specifically for students and postdocs from HSS, and featured one of the first workshops ever on the highly-anticipated career planning tool for HSS, ImaginePhd. Several panels featuring topics such as research beyond the tenure track and media and communications were also geared toward HSS students. As a result, the disciplinary background of the attendees was far more diverse this year, but the consistent theme of the conference remained the same: A PhD gives you many career options, and the more you know about them, the better prepared you will be to navigate them.

Beyond Academia GOES FORTH « Continued from page 1

Advice from the conference:

Nils Gilman, who holds a PhD in intellectual history, had these messages for PhDs looking to transition out of academia: 1) make your move when an industry is booming; 2) don’t look for the perfect first job, just get close; 3) redefine yourself from what you know to what your skills are; 4) read the business press (at least a bit) to learn the language; 5) be patient and persistent; 6) put yourself in a position to be lucky by getting out there; 7) don’t undersell yourself; 8) don’t be afraid- you can find intellectually satisfying work outside academia and you are well-equipped to do it.

On a similar note, Vivienne Ming, PhD in neuroscience, provided this advice:

1) It’s a big world and you don’t have to choose one thing to do in it; 2) find and focus on what motivates you; 3) some new life is coming- don’t be afraid to start anew.

Other recurring themes emphasized throughout the conference included: 1) be conscious about and build your online professional persona; 2) networking is key to making connections that will ultimately get you hired; 3) informational interviews are invaluable for learning about careers; 4) know and emphasize your transferable skills; 5) know the skills you need to build to get your dream job; 6) leaving academia is NOT “second best”. A non-academic career can be just as rewarding and fulfilling and successful as an academic one.

Beyond these takeaways, the attendees appreciated the opportunity to jumpstart their networks and make new connections during the conference. If you missed this year’s conference, we encourage you to start your own BA conference at your UC campus or join us next year at UC Berkeley’s fifth annual BA conference. To see the full list of speakers from this and previous years’ conferences, as well as other upcoming events organized by the BA student team, please visit www.beyon academia.org/.
Did you know...

that in science fields, women and men remain unequal, in spite of laws insisting on equality? Paul Voosen reported on less-obvious signs of the gender gap ["The Subtle Ways Gender Gaps Persist in Science," March 06, 2016, The Chronicle of Higher Education]. He cites recent studies by various authors showing that, after controlling for a host of factors, women appear to do the labor of science, while men contribute to the ideas, analysis and financial backing of research. In addition, both women and men faculty members are more likely to choose male students as lab managers, and more likely to agree to mentoring white male researchers. There are also several other pernicious forms of bias that we all commit. The availability of social media and large data sets has facilitated this kind of research, but the patterns do not explain the reason behind the bias. Researchers emphasize that in the absence of explanation, we need to talk more about the existence of the bias, and where it is prevalent.

Tricia Serio ["Speak up about subtle sexism in science," 26 April, 2016, Nature] points out that it may be the microaggressions that wear us down as much as the larger, discriminatory issues. She encourages sharing our perceptions of comments and incidents that make us feel inadequate or marginalized, and to raise awareness on all sides. To this end, she has created a site for this very purpose, the STEM Speak Your Story Project, that enables women to describe such experiences.

Maybe much of the problem is with communication which, apparently, many scientists are prone to getting wrong in other ways as well. Tim Ward and Teresa Erickson have tried to distill some of the difficulties that we, as scientists, have in being heard, to four reminders ["4 Mistakes Scientists Make When They Communicate," 01/12/2016, Huffington Post]: First, don’t speak about accuracy in scientific or statistical terms; instead, state the meaning of the data upfront. Second, get a seat at the table in order to be heard. Third, do not assume the facts will speak for themselves; advocate for the facts. Finally, lead with the relevance of a topic, not the evidence, to get attention. We’ve all failed to do this at one time or another.

Speaking of communication, one female scientist, aerospace engineer Nicole Sharp, chose to leave her stable job as an engineer in the defense industry to pursue creating her blog on fluid dynamics full-time. Unlike most bloggers, her page is written in straight-up scientific style, using images and prose to illuminate concepts in fluid dynamics. So far, she has relied on donors to keep her venture afloat. What has attracted an unprecedented amount of interest is her ability to explain and illustrate phenomena in ways that are broadly understandable ["Going with the flow" By Beryl Lieff Benderly Apr. 6, 2016]

With a contract expiration looming last September, the University and the union opted to extend the collective bargaining agreement for one year. There were several difficult issues that were left unanswered. Given neither side knew the outcome of key economic uncertainties, a year one extension provide the best course of action.

The main issue was money. Postdocs are exempt employees, who work a minimum of 40 hours per week. There was a proposed Executive Order to the Department of Labor (DOL) to increase the salary threshold for overtime to $50, 440 annually. Since the nature of research cannot be compared to widget making, Postdocs cannot be treated like hourly, non-exempt employees. Yet, the proposed Executive Order did not distinguish hourly and salaried duties; the order only provides for a salary threshold.

Postdocs are tied now to the National Institute of Health (NIH) Ruth L. Kirschstein Experienced-Based Stipend Scale. Postdocs receive increases upon re-appointment or on an anniversary date, depending on the length of the appointment. The scale sets a floor, meaning Postdocs can earn more, but not less than the experience level minima.

The DOL has released its new rule and the minimum is $913 per week or $47, 476 annually with a December 1st implementation date. It will be raised again every three years. The next increase will be to $51, 168 in 2020.

The scale has provided for regular increases based on experience. However, the latest scale in effect since February 1st falls short of the DOL rule for levels 0 – 2. The University estimates 50% of the approximately 6,500 Postdocs would be affected by the rule, meaning to keep them exempt, they’d have to earn $47, 476 annually. Though unrealistic in research, the other option would be to keep the workload to 40 hours per week.

The second key issue involves Child Care. While the University is sympathetic to the difficulties Postdocs encounter in securing quality child care in order to continue research, with the economic constraints of potentially higher salaries, Child Care remains an unresolved issue. Further complicating these economic issues is the fact that all funding comes from grants, fellowships or sources paid directly to postdocs. Nadine Fishel, UC Chief Negotiator states, “While UC strives to maintain its world class research, funds are limited.”
Mark Lawson is a Professor in Residence of Reproductive Medicine at UC San Diego and since October 2015, has been Director of the President’s Postdoctoral Fellowship Program (PPFP). The son of a Mexican mother and United States-born father, he grew up in Southern California as a Mexican-American. Lawson’s childhood did not expose him to the social issues of diversity, ethnicity, and race that he would later face and in which he would invest much of his time and energy. His father was a member of the US Marine Corps, and as he was constantly re-stationed, his family would frequently move to bases across the country. Lawson remembers how “racially integrated and diverse” the military was, which he largely attributes to the fact that the military is built on performance and rank, allowing it to absorb all ethnicities and races in a non-discriminatory way that “sort of preceded the rest of society.”

Things changed when Lawson entered a highly diverse high school in Southern California. For the first time, he encountered “disparaging comments about Mexicans and blacks.” When he enrolled at San Diego State University (SDSU), he continued to perceive the “existence of disparities that [he] hadn’t appreciated before.” Apart from falling in love with bench science during his time at SDSU, Lawson became “aware of issues of diversity in academia.” While pursuing his Ph.D in the biological sciences at UC Irvine, it felt natural for Lawson to help with outreach activities. He visited high schools in Santa Ana which were very different in their ethnic and racial composition compared to the high schools in Irvine, despite their geographical proximity. While Santa Ana has a large working class Latino population, Irvine is comprised mainly of Asian and white middle class residents.

Ever since those outreach activities in the mid-1980s, Lawson has been passionate and committed about service that addresses diversity issues. “During my entire academic career, I’ve served on diversity or minority affairs committees for professional societies,” says Lawson emphatically. For example, he worked for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by mentoring minority researchers and, together with a colleague from the University of Colorado, conducted a national training program funded by the NIH for minority researchers.

As a cumulative result of all these experiences, Lawson acquired a wide range of skills and tools needed to foster a more diverse academy. When the job posting for the position as Director of the PPFP came under Lawson’s radar, he felt that “[he had] to do this [apply for the position].” There was an additional personal reason why Lawson believed himself to be the right person for the job: he was selected as one of the PPFP’s Postdoctoral Fellows in 1993, an experience which he says helped him immensely in developing as a scholar.

Lawson believes that the PPFP has the potential to become a paradigm for the professional and academic training of postdocs in general, across the country, and across disciplines. It can foster a “way to understand how to support careers that are in the most difficult position to advance.” As Director, he will work towards shifting the debate to focus on institutionalizing the postdoc experience as part of a defined career spectrum rather than as an “amorphous gap between graduate school and career.” To achieve this goal, Lawson mentions two concrete steps he will take as Director. First, he wants to ensure that the program is on strong financial footing going forward. From a practical perspective, Lawson would most like to see institutional-wide spread and growth of the program so that it may effect a cultural change. Second, Lawson will work towards extending the reach of the program to other centers of research, such as the national laboratories. In doing so, he hopes that the PPFP will create links to those cultures, allowing postdocs who are interested in the national laboratories to gain on-site training and preparation to work in these specific environments.

Lawson believes that the PPFP has the potential to be a national leader for postdoctoral training. He credits his gifted and highly committed co-workers in the program for making it into a flagship program. In particular, Lawson mentioned Kimberly Adkinson, Assistant Director of the PPFP. He related a story about Adkinson to showcase the passion and level of commitment of his co-workers. One day, not long after he took up the position as Director, Lawson walked into the office which he shares with Adkinson and heard her sigh while looking at her computer screen. Lawson, thinking she was distressed, asked “What’s going on? Are you okay?” Adkinson looked at Lawson, and replied: “I’m just reading about the work our postdocs do, and I just can’t believe how smart they are, and how privileged I am to work with them.”
The lack of diversity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has been widely studied. In the biomedical sciences specifically, one study revealed that underrepresented minority (URM) scholars in those disciplines are less likely to obtain research grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (Ginther et al. Science 333, 1015-9). Without funding, the success of URM faculty in obtaining tenure is unlikely, and without tenured URM faculty to inspire future generations of URM researchers, this lack of diversity will continue. A critical factor that contributes to this situation is the lack of mentoring in grant writing and many other areas such as management of time, resources, and people (Shavers et al. J Natl Med Assoc 97, 1063-77; Chang et al. J Res Sci Teach 555-80). In response to these studies and recommendations made by the NIH Advisory Committee to the Director Working Group on Diversity in the Biomedical Research Workforce, a number of strategies were funded, including the National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN).

The NRMN is a nationwide consortium of biomedical professionals and institutions that aims to provide networking and mentorship opportunities to individuals from groups identified by the NIH as underrepresented in biomedical, behavioral, clinical, and social science research careers. The expected outcome is to increase the diversity of the biomedical workforce by enabling mentees across career stages to find effective mentors who support them during their career development, thus increasing their retention in biomedical careers. The main approach of NRMN is to offer a platform of skilled mentors and to facilitate matches to diverse mentees from undergraduate to early career faculty levels. Mentors can be professionals across race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ableism, and geography, with demonstrated expertise in culturally responsive mentoring. Mentor training is an important component of NRMN, and they offer a number of programs that vary in format and level.

Postdoctoral training in biomedical fields offers very little training in mentoring and other critical skills needed to be a successful research professional. The NRMN offers a platform for postdoctoral scholars of all backgrounds to learn about mentoring in culturally responsive ways, gain access to resources that will help improve mentoring skills, and obtain additional experience mentoring undergraduate and graduate students outside their institution. This experience will not only allow postdocs to obtain very valuable training, but also increase their understanding of the lack of diversity in science, and why this has a negative effect on scientific research overall. By becoming an NRMN mentor, postdocs will experience firsthand the positive and significant impact that mentoring can have on their mentees’ careers as well as their own. Involvement as an NRMN mentor will also help postdocs become more effective and inclusive leaders. These qualities are highly valued by organizations interested in a diverse workforce, which include corporations, non-profits, and governmental organizations, as well as colleges and universities.

Postdocs from underrepresented backgrounds can also participate as mentees, thus expanding their network by interacting with scientists outside their institution who have had diverse career paths and are at various career stages. A key feature of this virtual mentoring is the ability to find mentors based on the mentee’s preferences and interests. Postdoctoral mentees can also take advantage of the NRMN programming and resources which include webinars, news, and links to other opportunities. Additionally, NRMN provides programs for postdocs and junior faculty to develop grant proposal writing skills. The Steps Towards Academic Research (STAR) Fellowship Program and Grantwriting Uncovered: Maximizing Strategy, Help, Opportunities, Experiences (GUMSHOE) are available for those planning to submit a grant proposal in the next year. The Grant Writers Coaching Group and Proposal Preparation Program (NRMN-P3) are designed for people currently working on a grant proposal. Lengths of programs vary from a few months to a year.

Postdoctoral scholars interested in the NRMN mentor training programming and curriculum should contact the NRMN Mentor Training Core via email at MTC@NRMNet.net.

J. Marcela Hernandez, PhD is the Arts and Sciences Director for Graduate and STEM Diversity at The Ohio State University and Diversity Officer for the NPA. Vanessa González-Pérez, PhD, is an Assistant Research Professor at Washington State University and Diversity Officer for the NPA.
Dear Lilianna,

I met Malik in Istanbul University while doing my PhD in molecular and cell biology. While we dated, we agreed that we could get married while still being students, but that we would not have children until we finished our degrees. Three months after graduation, I got pregnant and was so excited to have our first child. At almost the same time, Malik was offered a postdoctoral position at UC Merced. At first we were both happy, but as time passed, I became anxious about leaving Turkey. Keep in mind that at this point, I was only three months pregnant and I didn’t want to leave my family. But because I love Malik so much, I decided to accompany him to Merced.

For the last six months of my pregnancy, I stayed home alone and had no friends. Plus, the American medical system is so strange. Because I had language and cultural barriers, I felt so isolated in Merced. It’s such a small city compared to Istanbul. As it turns out, I had a beautiful baby girl and love her very much. But Malik works so many hours in the lab. When he comes home, he has his dinner, barely talks to me and then goes to bed. I don’t know what to do. Maybe something is wrong with me because I keep getting feelings of sadness. I attribute this to missing my family who isn’t here to help me with my baby. Sometimes, I even have thoughts about returning home without Malik. What is worse, I am beginning to resent my baby as being the cause of my problems. No one knows how I feel as I feel ashamed to tell anyone.

Please help me.
Azra

Dear Azra,

Thank you for sharing your experience with me. Believe it or not, I know how you feel and I have heard stories similar to yours from many other friends throughout the years. We love our husbands, we support their careers and we follow them overseas and build a safe nest for them to come home from their labs when they are exhausted or disappointed by the results of their research. We listen to their complaints, cook for them, comfort them, take care of our homes and our children, dedicate all of our time to our new families, and sometimes end up forgetting our own goals and dreams until we start feeling sad or resenting our loved ones for putting us through all this. Like you are feeling right now.

Well Azra, I think we “loving partners” need some kind of wake up call. Truth is, we chose to leave our countries and join our partners in their academic adventure in the US. And it’s actually okay to step back for a little while in order to take care of a new family and support your partner’s chance to succeed – but only if it’s for a little while.

I understand that you are a scientist yourself and I am sure you are a talented one. Once your little girl gets older and is able to spend part of the day in childcare, you will get some of your time back. Prove to yourself (not your husband) that you are able to make the most of that time - even far from home, even with few or no friends at all! Enroll in a class, look for other women like you (there are many of them in all the UC campuses, even if the system still does not do enough for us), and see if there are any available work opportunities for you to regain your own professional identity.

Your partner is absorbed in his world right now, fighting for his place in the sun. UC Merced is as competitive as the other UC campuses and his energy is limited. Accept the fact that, for now, you can’t really rely on him for all the things you may need, but you can rely on yourself. Back in Turkey, when you accepted Malik’s offer to come to the US, you proved to be bold enough for such a challenge. Be bold again - use all of the tools you may have to get in touch with local people: your food, your craft talents, your identity as a mother, your science skills. Own the decision to come here. Build your own adventure in this country which, believe me, is friendly and welcoming to foreigners most of the time. Things will get better little by little as you understand them better. Days will become more pleasant and full if you don’t just wait for your husband to come home, but start going out with your little girl, exploring places and taking advantage of all the opportunities out there. Study the language to become more independent and regain control of your own life. It’s really up to you. Good luck!

Love, Liliana

Liliana Cardile is an Italian journalist living in Berkeley. She used to cover international political issues and cross-cultural topics for a well-known Italian weekly publication. She also traveled internationally, shooting TV documentaries, and worked on Italian TV as an anchorwoman.

Liliana met her husband in China where she was spending a sabbatical year learning Mandarin. Five days after their marriage, in 2008, she moved to the U.S. with him when her husband began a teaching career at UC Berkeley. In the Bay Area she became officially a “spouse” and her two children were born in Berkeley. She has always been focused on making the most of this experience.
What was the world like years ago before Smart Phones, laptops, tablets, texting, Skyping, downloads, updating…constant connectivity? Well, it was probably somewhat less stressful without always depending on our multiple devices that update us at breakneck speed and allow us to stay in touch with friends, family, bosses and co-workers every second of the day. That being said, how could we now truly give all of that up? Here are some startling statistics:

- 84% of cell phone users say they could not go a single day without their device.
- Studies indicate that some mobile device owners check their devices every 6.5 minutes due to a condition known as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).
- “Cell phone checking” has become so contagious that some researchers are calling it the “new yawn”…you see someone check their cell phone, you need to do it immediately as well.

Mindfulness has been shown to assist with:
- Managing stress
- Reducing anxiety and depression
- Improving how you feel about yourself
- Giving you a more positive outlook on life

So, if you’re feeling overwhelmed with all of this technology, what to do? The simplest advice is to just turn it off! And, like all habits, it’s probably going to be difficult to disconnect at first, with various thoughts running through your mind…all of the what ifs that accompany the decision to be unconnected for a period of time.

But it’s healthy to do so. It allows you to become ‘present’ with what’s around you that’s not on a device screen. Some refer to this as mindfulness.

Sources:

Be Mindful

Turning off your device allows you to become ‘present’ with what’s around you.

Once you are disconnected from technology for a period of time, you may find yourself feeling less anxious, less stressed and more willing to take that meditation or yoga class that you’ve been considering!
Adding the Secret Sauce:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
University of California
President Janet Napolitano

“Three-quarters of those students end up in ladder-ranked positions in the faculty - one of the many ways in which this is an extraordinarily rich community of scholars, learners, and researchers,” she says.

She also spoke about her ongoing commitment to finding ways to prepare UC postdocs for life outside the academy, given that there will not be faculty positions for all of them. The UC system is looking at ways of helping postdocs in relevant fields to start their own companies, by giving them access to start-up funding, by helping them move from lab or prototype to marketability. She talks with pride of the UC Ventures initiative, which provides support for commercializing academic innovations, and QB3, which includes “Start Up in A Box,” where you can get legal and documentation assistance and incubator space.

She is also paying attention to the issue of UC’s commitment to broader postdoctoral education going forward: “I have been talking with the graduate deans about ways to help postdocs attain the private sector education they might need, particularly in terms of business skills. I’ve also been talking to employers about viewing our postdoc population as a recruitment source. Postdoctoral students are highly intelligent, motivated, and skilled. In an economy like California’s, they should be in demand in a lot of ways. I’m committed to helping that happen.”

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I asked her if she thinks of postdocs in the humanities and social sciences in similar terms, and what initiatives are underway for this group of postdocs: “I’m not only thinking of postdocs in the STEM fields,” she assured us. “When I talk with potential employers, they are very interested in people who can think creatively, who can write, who can digest data and analyze it intelligently. These are all things that postdocs in the humanities and social sciences have mastered. There is a role for them in other sectors as well and some employers already know this. Once they realize how great our humanities and social sciences postdocs are, they want to hire more of them.”

President Napolitano let us know that her office will be announcing the appointment of the first University system-wide Senior Vice President for Research Innovation and Entrepreneurship who will report directly to her as part of her office’s support of an environment of creativity and entrepreneurship. The UC system-wide Grad Slam, in which graduate students from each campus are given three minutes to explain their work to a lay audience is a great example of the atmosphere of creativity that UC strives to create, she says. The finals of this year’s event were held in April at the headquarters of LinkedIn in San Francisco. That in itself is an opportunity for our students,” Napolitano says, “as well as a whole lot of fun.”

She has some advice for women in academia: “Accept the challenge. Don’t be discouraged or waylaid by hurdles.” She has one specific nugget of wisdom from her own experience: “Find mentors.” She says mentors are important for anyone entering a profession, but particularly for young women. “I had two mentors early in my career, and they were essential to my success,” she says. She is keen to encourage women in academia. “Be persistent,” she says. “Don’t get discouraged. More and more women are entering a whole variety of fields. You can, too.”

President Napolitano also has a word for the visiting scholar population. She says she views them as a crucial source of community enrichment and academic diversity. “The different ways they’ve obtained their undergraduate and pre-postdoc education brings enormous diversity, from which the whole system benefits,” she says. “It’s part of the secret sauce that makes us so special.”

Lastly, President Napolitano also assured the students and postdocs at UC Berkeley specifically that her office is actively engaging with the funding crisis on that campus. “Berkeley is an amazing institution that is heavily research-based, which is seeing the consequences now of a number of decisions made in the past that have contributed to a structural deficit unique in the UC system.”

She tells us that there are both short- and long-term measures in place, including the extension of a $190 million loan from the President’s Office. “This problem developed over the course of time and it is being addressed at all levels.”

Asked for any last words, President Napolitano spoke about the central importance of the creativity and energy of postdocs. “Young scholars see the future clearly. They provide the forward momentum to propel us into the new research economy. We will continue to pay close attention to this part of the university community,” she said.