

THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA BIOMEDICAL POSTDOCTORAL COUNCIL

Newsletter

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Congress passes spending bill granting NIH \$39.1 billion

Contributor: Christina Cho, PhD.

On August 23, the U.S Senate passed a spending bill that will increase the National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget by \$2 billion to \$39.1 billion—a 5.4% percent increase over the current level. The \$854 billion “minibus” spending bill for FY2019, [H.R. 6157](#), combines what had been two separate measures for the Labor-Health and Human Services portion of the budget ([S. 3158](#)) and the Department of Defense ([S. 3159](#)). Through the leadership of House and Senate Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairs Tom Cole (R-OK) and Roy Blunt (R-MO), and Ranking Members Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Patty Murray (D-WA), congress pushed back against President Donald Trump’s desire to cut spending for and eliminate several science agencies. The bill passed the senate by a 93-7 vote, demonstrating bipartisan support for increasing funding for biomedical research. According to Jon Retzlaff, a chief policy officer and vice president of science policy and government affairs of the American Association for Cancer Research, “The debate and overwhelming vote in favor of these two bills that were grouped together also underscores the Senate’s commitment to providing robust, sustained and predictable annual funding increases for the National Institutes of Health”. This is the fourth straight year in which the Senate has provided record funding for biomedical research at the NIH. In the first year, the Senate increased funding by \$2 billion,

What is included in the new bill

- \$415 million increase in spending on Alzheimer’s disease research to \$2.34 billion
- \$145 million increase for research on opioid addiction, development of opioid alternatives, pain management, and addiction treatment to \$500 million
- \$29 million increase in spending for the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) initiative to \$429.4 million
- \$11.2 million increase in funding for the Institutional Development Award (IDeA) program—created in 1993 to broaden the distribution of states that receive NIH funding—to \$361.8 million
- \$86 million increase for All of Us Research Program—the research component of the Precision Medicine Initiative (PMI) designed to obtain health and wellness data from one million or more Americans—to \$376 million
- \$37 million increase for National Strategy to Combat Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria (CARB) to \$550 million
- \$17.32 million increase for the Clinical and Translational Science Award—an initiative of the NIH’s national center for Advancing Translational Science (NCATS)—to \$560 million
- \$20 million increase for research on the universal flu vaccine to \$120 million
- \$25 million increase in spending for the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) to \$562 million
- \$12.6 million for the Gabriella Miller Kids Frist Research Act—an effort to develop a large-scale data resource to help researchers learn more about the biology of childhood cancer and structural birth defects, including the discovery of shared genetic pathways between these disorders.

followed by an additional \$2 billion increase in the second year, \$3 billion the third year, and \$2 billion this year, which accumulates to a 30% increase over the last four years. President Donald Trump signed this bill into law on September 28, 2018.

The combined measure of Labor, Health & Human Service, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations bill includes funding increases for several NIH research initiatives (see Box). Alzheimer's disease research will see the largest increase in funding of \$425 million dollars, reaching an all-time high of \$2.3 billion. This amount exceeds the \$2 billion funding goal for Alzheimer's research laid out in the [National Plan to Address Alzheimer's Disease](#). It is estimated that in 2018, the direct costs to American society of caring for those with Alzheimer's and other dementias will total an estimated \$277 billion. Costs will also expand over time. By 2050, combined Medicare and Medicaid spending on people with Alzheimer's is estimated to reach \$750 billion, an increase of 300%. Thus, there are financial incentives to fund research that aims to discover improved treatments for this disease.

Although there had been concern that funding could only decrease over time, it is encouraging to see that Congress is cognizant of the importance of biomedical research in the curing of debilitating and fatal diseases.



Life as a New International Postdoc in the United States

Contributors: Natashsa Jasiwal, PhD and Anumita Saha, PhD.

Life as a Postdoc is a challenging time for any researcher, as they balance strengthening their foothold in the scientific community, figuring out the next career steps, and potentially scout for projects that can pave the way for the coveted tenure track position. This process is even more difficult when trying to simultaneously maintain a work life balance. If you are a newly transitioned International postdoc in the United States, the experience can be even more daunting both culturally and scientifically.

The initial decision to move miles away from your family and friends is both exciting and difficult, but the hope of developing yourself professionally provides motivation. Getting the right visa, managing the expensive move, and cultural shocks upon arrival are all part of an international postdoc's early life. Dealing with language barrier, lifestyle, and food habit change can become overwhelming, but a friendly environment and support both at work and outside can go a long way to make early life in the United States more comfortable. Therefore, when planning for a postdoctoral option in US, it is wise to be aware of the hurdles one can face both at work and outside. Some of the biggest challenges an international postdoc faces in United States are discussed below:

The initial setup procedure such as getting a social security card, setting up a bank account, setting up health insurance and housing with all the necessary day to day necessities like internet, electricity, phone, are a lot to consider in a short span of time. In short, the whole procedure of transitioning to a postdoc position in United States of America is not at all an easy task. Apart from the afore-mentioned tasks, there are other baffling number of things which are hard acquire, and even harder to understand. Since the postdocs are new to the country, they definitely do not have any credit history or driving history in the country, which makes them ineligible for obtaining credit cards, car loans, or car insurance. Credit history from the home country is not considered sufficient by most banks when evaluating eligibility. Home owners are also reluctant to lease housing to international post-docs. As a result you might end up paying much higher interest rate or rent to negotiate the situation. Public transportation is not great in all parts of the country, which complicates logistics of commute to work, buying groceries and basic household goods.

Postdocs with families have even more hurdles to deal with, both financially and otherwise. The low salary of a postdoc makes it difficult to survive with family and to maintain a comfortable standard of living. Although this depends mainly on the city and variable cost of living, it is still hard to maintain a good life style with family just based on one postdoc salary. Therefore, it is best if a spouse can contribute to the household. Postdocs on exchange visitor programs such as a J1 visa can have their spouse at least have the benefit of working on a dependent visa, but even then, the spouse will not automatically have permission to work in the US. Instead they need a separate permit which may not be trivial to obtain. The next step will be to find the right job for the spouse. If the spouse is not in academia, it can be hard to convince potential employers about your visa situation, as many non-academic employers are not always aware of J programs. Furthermore, many universities renew postdocs' contracts annually, and as a result DS2019 (see inset) is also renewed yearly. Consequently, a non-citizen spouse of a J1 recipient has to renew their work permit annually as well, and this whole process is tedious as well as expensive. To add to that, most potential employers of the spouse are not comfortable with these types of work permit situation and resulting uncertainty. Hence, a non-citizen spouse can be restricted in their job opportunities. If the postdoc is on H1B visa then a spouse cannot obtain a dependent work permit and has to stay home. Hence, postdocs should choose their visa options carefully. There are pros and cons to both visa options, so one should consult senior postdocs and the office of international services at their new institution before making any commitment.

The Form DS-2019 or "Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J-1) Status" is the basic document used in the administration of the exchange visitor program.

This form permits a prospective exchange visitor to seek an interview at a U.S. embassy or consulate in order to obtain a J visa to enter the United States.

The Form DS-2019 identifies the exchange visitor and their designated sponsor and provides a brief description of the exchange visitor's program, including the start and end date, category of exchange, and an estimate of the cost of the exchange program.

Source: j1visa.state.gov/participants/how-to-apply/about-ds-2019

Awareness of the problems one might face in the early transition phase can help a new international postdoc plan wisely to make their stay in the United States productive and satisfying. After getting the offer letter, one should plan beforehand for all the things mentioned above. Try to find another international postdoc who is already in the same city or at the same university, who can help you with these initial adjustments. Talking to more experienced people who have been in United States for a long time can definitely help, especially if they can help you by being a guarantor. Having a guarantor can ease the step of leasing a house and getting a credit card. In a worst-case scenario, one can opt for higher rate of interest and try to bring it down in couple of months after building credit, or negotiating with other companies. The point is, start building your credit history and driving history the moment you enter the United States to minimize your costly and burdensome early phase of postdoc life. The better prepared you are, the more successful you will be.

Being a postdoc is one of the most crucial phases in a researcher's life. Although there are certainly more difficulties ahead both scientifically and non-scientifically before you can make your dream come true and land your dream job, reducing the stress associated with the initial transition as an international postdoc can make the experience wonderfully rewarding.

We hope that the information will be useful and informative. As always discuss your immigration status with the office of international affairs/services of your sponsoring institution and don't hesitate to liaise with your fellow postdocs!

Best wishes for a successful and rewarding career!

Meet the New BPC Co-President, Jason Goldsmith



Thank you for electing me to be BPC co-president. For those of you who don't know me, I am in the beginning of my third year of post-doc in Dr. Youhai Chen's lab in the Pathology Department/Immunology Graduate Group. I was previously the Public Relations and Advocacy co-chair on the BPC for the past 2 years. I am married and I have two children, an almost-5-year-old son, and an 18-month-old daughter. I grew up in Oregon, when to college in Boston, and did my MD/PhD at UNC-Chapel Hill. I moved here from Michigan after two years of internal medicine residency because my wife received a wonderful job offer at Janssen, 10 minutes from where she grew up. I thus live in the suburbs and commute by train an hour each way here to Penn. My personal experiences as a parent/postdoc, as well as numerous conversations I have had with other parent/post-docs, is central to my objectives as a BPC co-president. Additionally, I ran a small business for 8 years (an MMA gym while in graduate school), and plan to bring my management expertise to the BPC.

My research focuses on intestinal epithelial regeneration and wound healing, and specifically the interplay of intestinal stem cells and the immune system in that process, using ischemia/reperfusion, radiation, and colitis models of injury. The Chen lab has recently been studying the role of a family of proteins important to the immune system known by the acronym TIPE (TNF- α induced protein 8-like), and I have recently

found that the original family member, TNFAIP8, regulates intestinal stem cell function in the context of wound healing.

As your BPC co-president my two main goals are to make the post-doc (and BPC) experience at Penn more compatible for those with families (and/or longer commutes), and to facilitate increased communication both between BPC committees and with post-docs at large. Specifically, within the council my first objectives are:

- 1) have the BPC meetings rotate between morning, noon, and evening meetings to improve attendance.
- 2) improve institutional memory and create a new-council-member guide.
- 3) improve coordination among the various committees via new infrastructure such as Slack.

More globally, my goal is that the increased coordination among BPC committees, along with a renewed commitment to post-docs with families, will result in an increased variety of events and resources for post-docs. Furthermore, the increased commitment to communication will also be outward facing, and I hope the BPC will be more transparent, responsive, and visible.

I look forward to serving as your BPC co-president; please feel free to email me with any comments, concerns, or ideas you may have for the BPC.

Highlights from the BPC Spotlight Café on October 3rd

Contributor: Dondra Bailey, PhD.

On October 3, 2018 the Biomedical Postdoctoral Council (BPC) Diversity Committee hosted Dr. Akira Drake Rodriguez for our monthly Spotlight Café. Dr. Rodriguez, a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of City and Regional Planning at PennDesign, led a discussion on race, power, and justice. The meeting was an open dialogue in which all attendees were able to share their perspectives and thoughts on race in academia. Attendees also opened up to share different aspects of how race has been an important factor in decisions relating to power and justice in the academic setting. Dr. Rodriguez rounded out the discussion stating that we have to continue “to be allies for all and advocate for what is right.”

Join us in November for our next Spotlight Café. For more information you can send an e-mail to bpccdiversitycommittee@gmail.com.

Announcements

Upcoming STEM Networking Mixer on October 19, 2018

The Biomedical Postdoctoral Council (BPC) invites old and new postdocs to attend a STEM Networking Mixer co-sponsored by BPC and the Ernest E. Just Biomedical Society.

Postdocs are needed as mentors! This is a unique opportunity for undergraduates in the Penn community to engage with postdocs and we want to help facilitate this interaction. We are also beginning to form and establish Mentoring Circles. The ultimate goal of Mentoring Circles is to support and strengthen the development of underrepresented groups in biomedical sciences. Come to the mixer to learn more!

DATE: Friday, October 19, 2018
 TIME: 3:30 pm - 5:00 pm
 LOCATION: Levin Building, Rm. 111, 425 S. University Ave.

Refreshments will be provided. Kindly RSVP by Wednesday, October 17th:
<https://goo.gl/forms/h45RxUAYoJWbDFeC3>

For more information contact bpcdiversitycommittee@gmail.com

Autumn in Philly

Contributor: Pearl Lee, PhD.

The fall season brings a variety of events and festivals to Philadelphia. From harvest festivals and new exhibitions, there's no shortage of things to do this fall. Read on for some of our top choices for this season.

Pumpkinland

Pumpkinland is open (September 8 – November 4) and takes center stage at Linvilla Orchards. Enjoy live music and entertainment, hayrides, train rides, pony rides, and face painting. Test your navigation skills in our straw bale and cornfield mazes. Pick your own apples and see the Linvilla jack-o-lantern exhibit, along with the annual Costume Parade.

For more information: linvilla.com/family-fun/pumpkinland



"It does not disappoint! For those who think they've outgrown a good old-fashioned haunted house experience during the Halloween season, think again. [The makers of Terror Behind the Walls] took a beautiful ruin and turned it into one of the most creative transformations I have seen. A proper Philly tradition -- do not miss this!"

- Abdhi Sarkar, PhD, Co-Chair of the BPC Social Events Committee

If you are interested in organizing or being a part of a group to visit Terror Behind the Walls, email bpc.social@gmail.com.

Terror Behind the Walls

With its crumbling cells and imposing guard towers, the **Eastern State Penitentiary** is eerie any day of the year. But when Halloween approaches, the fortress-like attraction ups the ante on spine-tingling fright. Brave souls enter this haunted house set inside the historic prison to encounter six interactive experiences such as zombies roaming the halls, and creepy doctors and nurses performing gory procedures.

Only on select evenings (September 21 – November 10). Check out easternstate.org/halloween for more information.

Mural Arts Month

From September 26 – November 3, Mural Arts Philadelphia honors its 3,800 works of public art with tours of neighborhood gardens, panel discussion on public art, and a lineup of free and pay-what-you-wish events.

For a full list of events with location details, check out: muralarts.org/muralartsmonth

Fall at Longwood Gardens

Kids can play among pumpkins at Longwood Gardens' Pumpkin Playground (September 29 – October 31), while later on in the season the Chrysanthemum Festival (October 25 – November 18) will take place with over 17,000 colorful chrysanthemums creating floral art pieces.

For more details check: longwoodgardens.org

DesignPhiladelphia

Every fall, the city celebrates the historic role of design in the region while showcasing the innovation yet to come during DesignPhiladelphia (October 4 – 13) with nearly 100 events held all over the city. Events include a giant launch party at Bok and The Center for Architecture and Design acting as an educational hub with ongoing series of workshops and panel discussions.

For more details and a complete listing of events, go to: designphiladelphia.org

The GLOW: A Jack O'Lantern Experience

The GLOW returns to West Fairmount Park with over 5,000 hand-carved pumpkins lighting up the trails in this public space (October 4 – 28).

Reading Terminal Market Harvest Festival

Reading Terminal Market hosts its Harvest Festival (October 13, 10 am – 4 pm) right outside its doors with an urban farm where guests can get on a hay ride, enjoy fall beer at the beer garden, listen to live music, and taste food from the market's vendors.

Pop-up Pumpkin Patch

Franklin Square invites guests, especially kids 10 and under, to their pop-up pumpkin patch to pick out a pumpkin and decorate it for free (October 20, 12 pm – 2 pm). Visitors can also enjoy a round of spooky mini-golf.

Witches and Wizards Weekend

Formerly the Harry Potter Festival, the new Witches and Wizards festival weekend (October 19 – 20) in Chestnut Hill transforms the neighborhood into an enchanting magic-filled haunt. Attendees will find fire-breathers, dancing zombies, hay rides, costumes, and more. The popular Quidditch tournament returns for its ninth year, and Woodmere Art Museum hosts a straw maze. Older witches and wizards can enjoy a pub crawl through outdoor beer gardens and have their fortunes told along the way.

Check chestnuthillpa.com/events/witches-wizards for a complete schedule of events.

GayBINGO!

AIDS Fund puts on the monthly GayBINGO!, a 20-years-running monthly fundraiser hosted by hilarious drag queens at The Gershman Y (Upcoming dates: November 17, and December 15). All proceeds benefit the AIDS Fund. Each October, the organization welcomes thousands of early-morning participants for a charity walk (October 21) that begins at the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where a portion of the national AIDS Memorial Quilt is on display.

Philadelphia Film Festival

Every October (October 18 – 28), the Philadelphia Film Society hosts the Philadelphia Film Festival to showcase critically acclaimed and through-provoking films. The Festival presents these films alongside exclusive events with actors, directors, and industry guests.

For more information: filmadelphia.org/festival

Parkway Soirée

The year-long Parkway 100 Celebration ends with a grand finale event, Parkway Soirée, on October 26 (exactly 100 years of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway) from 5 pm – 10 pm. The Parkway 100 finale promotes 100 family-friendly activities and experiences in the Parkway Museums District, starting off with the cutting of a giant birthday cake for the Parkway at 5 pm at The Franklin Institute. There is also live music and square dancing around Logan Square. Guests can grab dinner from some of Night Market Philadelphia's favorite sweet and savory food trucks.

Several Parkway museums and cultural institutions will offer extended hours and special programming to celebrate the centennial, such as pay-what-you wish evening admission and a Dino Drafts beer garden at

The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, and performances by Ballet X and the Philadelphia Argentine Tango School at the Parkway Central Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

For a complete list of events, go to: parkway100.org/events

Head of the Schuylkill Regatta

Head of the Schuylkill Regatta welcomes spectators along Kelly Drive to cheer on College rowers, high school crews, elite athletes and world champions during a 2.5-mile race along the Schuylkill River (October 27 – 28).

For full schedule of events check: hosr.org/schedule

Philly Farm and Food Fest

This year at the Navy Yard (October 28, 11 am – 4 pm), visitors can enjoy samples from area farms, food from local food trucks, and drinks from regional producers (beer, whiskey, and more) as well as shop at the 200-vendor farmers market.

For more information, go to: phillyfarmfest.org

Philadelphia Museum of Art's Contemporary Craft Show

The 42nd annual Philadelphia Museum of Art's Contemporary Craft Show will be held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center on November 1 – 4 with handmade jewelry, textiles, and mixed media on show, as well as for sale.

For more details go to: pmacraftshow.org

6ABC/Dunkin' Donuts Thanksgiving Parade

The nation's first Thanksgiving Day Parade keeps the tradition going every year. The parade wows crowds with fancy floats, giant balloons, marching bands, and other festive entertainment along JFK Boulevard and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway on November 22 from 8:30 am – 12 pm.

PAX Unplugged

PAX Unplugged spun out of the major gaming convention Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) to create a larger space for Tabletop games. It returns to Philly for a second year at the Pennsylvania Convention Center on November 30 – December 2. PAX Unplugged is specifically tailored to gamers of all ages. All of the content is meant to be enjoyed by the entire family and Sunday's offerings are specifically set up to appeal to younger gamers. For more details, go to: unplugged.paxsite.com