Establishing a Professional Development Certificate Program at Illinois

Mark E. Zulauf, Alexis L. Thompson
Postdoctoral Affairs Office, Graduate College, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

INTRODUCTION
The University of Illinois’ Postdoctoral Affairs Office was established in the fall of 2011, in part, to provide a centralized hub through which a community of support for postdocs could be fostered. Much of this support comes in the form of professional development activities that are arranged by the Postdoctoral Affairs Office as part of our professional development certificate program. While the postdoc appointment provides additional research training, the certificate program is designed to augment these fundamental skill sets that will help the postdoc become a successful and effective leader of a research team, business enterprise or classroom.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS
Our certificate program is designed to engage the postdoctoral scholar in a structured progression of activities relevant to his or her intended career path. The program comprises two certificates:

Certificate in Professional Development (Estimated completion: 6 – 9 months)
1. Create an Individual Development Plan (IDP)
2. Discuss goals with a mentor
3. Participate in 5 relevant professional development activities
4. Reflect on ways to incorporate and practice new skills
5. Summarize professional growth and refine IDP

Advanced Certificate in Professional Development (Estimated completion: 6 – 12 months)
1. Choose one area for continued growth
2. Complete three activities in this area
3. Demonstrate learning through a project or document
4. Discuss project with mentor
5. Summarize professional growth and refine IDP

The Postdoctoral Affairs Office organizes a comprehensive series of professional development activities on a 2-year cycle. Activity topics, such as communication and grant writing, scientific management, and teaching, are related to one or more of the NPA’s six core competencies.

ENGAGEMENT
The Postdoctoral Affairs Office supports the postdoc’s pursuit of the certificate by:
• Providing an orientation session in the form of a bimonthly welcome lunch for all newly arrived postdocs. A segment of the orientation session is devoted to a presentation of the benefits and progression of the certificates.
• Hosting an IDP workshop within 1 – 2 weeks of the welcome lunch. At the conclusion of the workshop, postdocs have completed step 1 of the first certificate.
• Planning a core series of professional development events throughout each term. Events include interactive workshops, panel discussions, and guest lectures.
• Leveraging campus resources and expertise to build a community of support for postdocs. Faculty—from seasoned professors to recent postdocs—share their experience with current postdocs.
• Partnering with the Graduate College Career Development Office to assist postdocs with their career goals and provide job search support.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Information on professional development resources and events is disseminated to postdoctoral scholars, their departments, and their faculty mentors via:
• The Postdoctoral Affairs Office website, grad.Illinois.edu/postdocs
• An online calendar of events for postdocs, and
• A biweekly newsletter for postdocs, The Postdoc Post.

“...The certificate program was an excellent way for me to identify my strengths and weaknesses regarding progress towards my career goals. With the support of the postdoctoral affairs office and my mentor, I was able to participate in activities to improve my skills in grant writing, scientific communication, and network building... This type of focus on continuous improvement will stick with me through the rest of my career.”

— Carrie, Postdoctoral Scholar

Postdoctoral Affairs Office