

International Postdoc Survival Guide

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Introduction

Being an international postdoc in the United States can be a daunting experience. There is the initial decision to move thousands of miles away from home; the possible language barrier, culture shock, and the other challenges one may face on arrival; the acclimatizing to life as a scientist in the United States, and the periodic visa difficulties that must be negotiated when traveling in and out of the country.

To help alleviate some of these stresses and better inform current and prospective international postdocs, the NPA has created an online resource, the ***Survival Guide for International Postdocs***. The Survival Guide was compiled by members of the former International Postdoc Committee (IPC) with the expert assistance of university international offices and postdoctoral offices, as well as an immigration attorney. It draws on the experiences of current and former postdocs who have traveled to the United States to do their postdoctoral training.

Several sections of the Survival Guide have been written specifically for prospective postdocs. ***Postdocing in the United States*** describes, for the uninitiated, what it is like to have a postdoc experience in this country, and how it may differ from similar experiences within other countries. ***Going in With Your Eyes Open*** offers advice on what people should ask before they accept a postdoctoral position in the United States. There is also advice for international postdocs for whom English is a foreign language.

Once one arrives in the United States, there can be a baffling array of tasks to be accomplished, such as obtaining a social security number or a driver's license. ***Signposts to Living in the United States*** provides the appropriate direction. Arriving in a foreign country with no credit history can also be problematic. Credit history from one's home country is not considered, and banks are reluctant to offer credit cards. Yet, some landlords and utility companies require a credit history, which can only be established with a credit card. To help with this potential catch-22, the guide contains advice and options for more easily obtaining a credit card and building a credit history in Building Credit.

Another section, which could be useful to all international postdocs, is ***A Quick Guide to Visas for International Postdocs***. This section describes the variety of visas that most international postdocs use for entry into the United States. This is a highly relevant aid given the current state of flux in visa regulations. This section outlines the terminology (*Do you know the difference between SEVIS and USCIS?*) and has a comparison between the J-1 and H-1B visas.

Earning income in the United States means that international postdocs need to understand the regulations of the U.S. tax system. ***The Beginners Guide to Income Taxes for International Postdocs*** provides some basic information. *Please note: We are not income tax attorneys or certified public accountants. Please contact the Internal Revenue Service and/or income tax*

Introduction

professionals with your questions, for the most current information on taxation, or for assistance in preparing income tax forms.

Working several thousand miles from one's home country can lead to homesickness and a feeling of being disconnected from peers. Included in the guide are links to postdoctoral organizations in other countries, and to organizations for international scientists in the United States. Other links direct one to information about career-advancing opportunities both in the United States and in other countries. Lastly, one can read the stories of those who have already experienced life as a postdoc in the United States. ***Been There, Done That!*** contains anecdotes and advice from seasoned veterans who have come to the United States to do a postdoc.

It is the NPA's hope that the Survival Guide will become a useful initial resource for both prospective and current international postdocs in the United States, a resource that will evolve and adapt to reflect changes that affect the international postdoc community. Comments, suggestions for improvements, and contributions to the ***Been There, Done That!*** section are greatly encouraged. Postdocs are invited to contact the [International Officers](#).

Postdocing in the United States

About to start your postdoctoral experience in the United States? This will certainly be a very exciting time, with different experiences both professionally and personally. The postdoc experience in the United States can be quite different for an international postdoctoral scholar and for a domestic postdoc. Additionally, the experiences and expectations of being a postdoc in your own home country compared to a postdoc in the United States can also be profoundly different. While this experience will vary widely between individuals based on a number of factors including your location, your institution, and your primary investigator (PI), there are a number of common factors that seem to affect everyone's experience. In the hope of making this transition a little smoother, here are a few major points to keep in mind.

One of the first hurdles you may encounter as an international postdoc in the United States probably occurs before you even arrive here to work. Before coming to the United States to work, you will require a valid visa. There are a number of visa types that you may be eligible for, and while it is not the topic of this article, it is certainly worth your while looking into the differences between them (a great place to start is the **Quick Guide to Visas**). For example, different visas will allow different length of stay and determine whether your

spouse can obtain employment authorization. Therefore, it is important that you are aware of the differences between visas, and that you choose the appropriate visa for you (and your family's) needs.

While most of the paperwork required will be performed by the sponsoring institution (your employer), it is still important to be aware of the visa requirements for yourself and your family, if they are coming with you. Even after you have arrived in the country, there are still certain requirements that must be met and maintained for your visa to remain valid. Therefore, it is important for you to stay abreast of any changes in visa policies. This type of news and information may be available to you through the international center at your institution.

One of the most obvious differences many international postdocs find between the postdoc experience in their home countries and those in the United States is the philosophy behind these positions. A postdoc in the United States is still considered a trainee, which may be different to the perception in your home country and sometimes difficult to accept in the beginning. There is also a widespread but unwritten "rule" that your postdoctoral training should not last longer than five years. By the end of those five years, you should be in a "real job" (e.g.

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assistant professorship whether a research assistant professor or tenure-track). However, advancement is often difficult without individual funding and there are certain difficulties that are unique to international postdocs. While there is a host of different funding agencies, including government, private and public foundations, that provide funding for broad areas of research, e.g. National Institute of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), Howard Hughes Medical Institute, or specific research interests, e.g. National Parkinson Foundation, most funding agencies exclude non-residents from applying for awards and fellowships. Although a few agencies do provide such support, these grants are open to everyone, leaving the pool of grants available to international individuals highly limited.

While we are not suggesting that it is easy for a U.S. citizen or permanent resident to obtain funding, the limited resources available exacerbate this problem for the international postdoc. There are two consequences of being unable to attain independent funding. First, the ability to successfully apply for funding is highly regarded and counts in your favor when you are applying for your next position beyond the postdoc. Second, if you do not have independent funding, you are paid from the funding of your PI. In many cases,

your PI will therefore determine your salary, and there is evidence suggesting that international postdocs generally end up being paid less than their U.S. counterparts.

Several other differences are also frequently encountered in an international postdoc's experience in the United States. In the United States, postdocs are often expected to work long hours and put in more hours than is written on their time sheets, often working late and on weekends. While the number of hours you are 'expected' to put in differs from place to place and from lab to lab, it is the general expectation that a postdoc will put in longer hours than other lab personnel. It can become particularly difficult trying to balance your professional responsibilities with your personal/family life. These concerns will vary between individual experiences, based on the expectations of your PI. Clarifying these expectations early on, ideally before starting the postdoc position, would be advisable to prevent future conflicts.

Sometimes a conversation with the PI, allows both the postdoc and the PI to be on the same page as to what those expectations are (see *Going In With Your Eyes Open* for a useful framework for these conversations).

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In addition to the long hours, postdocs have traditionally received poor pay. An [NIH guideline for postdoctoral stipends](#) has been established to try to rectify the problem of low pay for postdoctoral researchers. However, many institutions have yet to implement internal policies to follow the guidelines. The salary offered to you will depend on your institution if there is an internal policy enforcing adherence to the guidelines. If not, then it will depend on your PI and his/her decision as to whether or not he/she will follow the NIH guidelines.

Another difference that may not initially be apparent but may come as a surprise is a possible age difference between you and the other postdocs and graduate students in the lab.

Depending on the length of the doctoral training program and requirements from your home country before entering a graduate program, it is not uncommon to find yourself as one of the youngest persons in the lab. Due to the longer training both in the graduate and undergraduate programs, many postdocs arriving from other countries with much shorter training programs, or ones who finished their training quickly, may find themselves in the same age bracket as the graduate students and much younger than the other postdocs in the lab. While this

should not pose any major problems for yourself and your work, this may be difficult for your lab mates to deal with, and it is something you should know.

This is a general list of some of the experiences, differences and difficulties that you may encounter during your postdoc experience in the United States. As mentioned already, the experience will be different for everyone, based on several different factors: lab, PI, institution, etc. However, it is our hope that this article will help prepare you for the transition to your postdoc experience in the United States and make this change a little smoother.

Going in With Your Eyes Open: What to Ask Before Accepting a Postdoctoral Position in the United States

This checklist of questions has been written to aid prospective postdocs in search of positions that will give them a fulfilling experience. By reading through these questions, by understanding the reasoning behind them, and by finding out the answers that are important for you, you will develop a much clearer idea of what a particular postdoctoral position has to offer. We hope that this checklist will empower those considering a postdoc, especially international candidates who are not acquainted with the U.S. system, to find appointments that suit his/her needs.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHECKLIST

This article has been written to aid prospective postdocs in search of positions that will give them a fulfilling experience. By reading through these questions, by understanding the reasoning behind them, and by finding out the answers that are important for you, you will develop a much clearer idea of what a particular postdoctoral position has to offer. We hope that this checklist will empower those considering a postdoc, especially international candidates who are not acquainted with the U.S. system, to find appointments that suit his/her needs.

In the right setting, a postdoctoral position in the United States is a fulfilling, stimulating and unforgettable experience. However, any one of a number of factors can leave you disappointed and frustrated at the end of the postdoc. You may feel your time in the postdoctoral position was too short, that you were underpaid and exploited, or that you were not sufficiently able to develop professionally to take the next step in your career. To help avoid this, it is essential that you determine exactly what you want from a postdoc, and that you identify suitable groups that could support you in your intellectual and professional growth. *A postdoc in the United States is intended as a temporary training opportunity that allows someone to gain the experience necessary to pursue the career of his/her choice.* For instance, if your long-term ambition is to work in a particular research field, you should consider not only the research interests of a group, but also how joining it would establish you within the field; e.g. thoroughly discuss the potential project(s) you would work on and how research is managed (*see below*). You may also believe that some teaching experience would help your future career, in which case you would investigate whether the future position offers that possibility. Or if your long-term ambition is to work within policy, journalism or administration, you should make sure you will have opportunities to attend conferences or courses in these areas. In addition to these considerations, other factors will contribute to your postdoctoral experience. Institutions may offer a postdoctoral office, a postdoctoral

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association or career development services, which provide valuable guidance. Other issues to consider are common to any job such as wages, vacation time and the length of your appointment, as well the availability of benefits (e.g. health and childcare, retirement).

The questions below are meant as a useful framework for discussions, allowing you to establish lines of communication with your mentor. This is extremely important, *since there is no universal definition of what a postdoctoral position should entail*. Establishing ground rules before accepting a postdoctoral position can avoid future frustrations.

THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL POSTDOCS

While the above issues are important for all those considering a postdoc in the United States, there are additional factors to consider if you are coming to the United States from another country.

- If you are unsatisfied with your situation and wish to transfer, you may find that the stipulations of your visa may hinder transfer from one position to another.
- A postdoctoral position in the United States may be different from apparently similar research positions offered abroad. To reiterate, the United States postdoctoral position is a temporary apprenticeship intended to be a stepping stone in a career path: it is not a permanent position.
- Postdoctoral compensation can vary widely. The wages paid by the National Institutes of Health to his/her fellows in the NRSA program are often used as a reference, but many postdocs (including international postdocs) are actually paid less than this.
- It is particularly important to analyze the benefits package that comes with any postdoctoral position you are offered, because the level of coverage for yourself and your family may vary. The United States does not have a national health system: therefore, your access to health care will be through the particular insurance offered by your employer (if it is offered).

For international postdocs, the support services offered by an institution are of fundamental importance. For instance, an international office dealing with visas (requests, renewals, etc.) is a very common and valuable resource. Other services (e.g. English language classes) may only be offered by some institutions.

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HOW TO USE THE CHECKLIST

In the checklist, the questions are grouped to follow the timeline of a standard application process. There is information to be gathered before the interview to assess if the group and the environment are going to foster your career advancement. During the interview, the reciprocal interchange allows you to clarify issues further and to make sure there is compatibility and a commonality of interests. Once you are offered a position, it is appropriate to negotiate additional benefits and establish a formal system of progress assessment or individual development plan with the PI (see below). We certainly do not recommend that you ask every question on the list, rather that you decide which ones are relevant to you. Also consider that during a typical interview, there is plenty of time in which discussion can be steered toward the topics of your interest without you asking a “formal” question. Some of the issues below are important to all postdocs; others are specific to international postdocs; and others, although important, may only be relevant for some areas of research. Many of the questions listed are appropriate to ask a prospective mentor, some are more appropriate to address with others such as a human resources or an international office representative at the institution. To the left of the questions, symbols indicate to whom we advise that you address each question.

THE CHECKLIST

† Principal Investigator (PI) ‡ Colleagues * Institution

Before the Interview:

1. Check the research group’s history.

Verify the publication record and track previous group members to determine whether the research setting is conducive to career development. Examine how many papers group members generate and the order of authorship. Does everybody generate first-author papers as well as contribute to other papers? Do they publish in high-impact or obscure journals? Do you think that performing similar work would further your career ambitions?

You can roughly estimate how long people stay in that group before progressing in his/her career.

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Consider contacting lab alumni for questions. This is preferably done by phone or in person: people, when contacted directly, tend to tell you more candidly about potential problems. If you have access to established people in the field, you can also enquire about the PI's reputation and connections among his/her colleagues. For example, working with an established PI will be very helpful for easing the publication process in the short term and for connecting to the right career opportunities in the medium-long term.

2. Gather information on the institution.

Find out the institution's location, the safety of the area and of the town, and its support offices (e.g. international office, postdoctoral office).

During the Interview:

3. Funding, salary and benefits

† What are the current funding sources of the research program? What is its funding history? How long will the current grants last? Where does my salary come from? Will my salary follow the NRSA/NIH pay scale? If not, what will my salary be and how is it determined? Can I apply for my own research grants? Or am I expected to apply for my own funding after a certain period? Will you support and coach me in that effort?

‡ It is also useful to ask the other members of the research group how funding applications are handled (constant work over time vs. last-minute rush) and how successful they are.

† Are you going to support travel and participation to conferences in my field of research, and/or others that advance my career?

† How much vacation time will I receive? Sick time? Expected hours per week?

‡ You may wish to ask your prospective colleagues how many hours a week on average they work. Consider that the PI may perceive this question negatively and think that you are going to be unproductive.

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4. Research issues

† What is the size of the research program (personnel, budget, lab space, etc)?

† ‡ What is the research program's training history? Where are the alumni now?

† What are you expecting my role in the lab to be, and what will my job responsibilities be?

† ‡ * Are there mechanisms of periodical (annual?) performance evaluation? What are they?

† Will a research assistant aid me in my research? Student or technician?

† ‡ How many people currently work on the same project?

† ‡ What are the other research projects in the group? You may also want to consider the interaction and the balance between the different research projects. More people studying a similar phenomenon by using different approaches provide a very stimulating environment for research and, most likely, a little more competitive situation. Many unrelated projects in the same lab will make for a more relaxing atmosphere, but may indicate a more unfocused lab and, potentially, lower chances for funding (a highly competitive process) especially if the research group is not very well established.

† ‡ What is the lab culture like? Do lab members spend social time or activities together and is that something important to you?

† How do we determine what my project is?

† How will you help me build a publication record?

† How often are we going to discuss research issues?

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† Can I take my project (or part of it) with me when I start my own independent research? Consider that PIs have very high pressure to develop high profile research to attract funding: therefore, several objective factors will influence how much you will be able to take with you to develop further. Depending on how established the research program is and how much your intellectual input was in the project design, you may be able to transfer your complete research or parts of it (e.g. a novel aspect to develop further).

† ‡ How are research supplies acquired?

5. Work-related issues

† ‡ What is the average length of the training period in this lab?

† What is the projected length of my appointment?

† Will I have teaching opportunities?

† Will I be encouraged to advance the postdoctoral experience through becoming involved in the PDA or NPA?

6. Human resources

* What are the benefits provided by the institute (e. g. health insurance, dental and vision coverage, retirement)? Do benefit packages change with the type of funding?

‡ * Does the institute have any policies or programs designed to meet the diverse needs of postdocs from different backgrounds?

‡ * Does the institute have a process for dealing with conflict resolution? This refers to mediating services by trained personnel to moderate and facilitate discussions between third parties that have difficulty communicating, usually as the result of a conflict. They are not attorneys.

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7. Visa issues

* What type of visa will the institution help me petition for: J1 or H1-B? These are the most common visas for International Postdocs. They have different characteristics and advantages that could suit distinct professional and personal goals. We recommend that you review the **Quick Guide to Visas** for a thorough, comparative description.

‡ * If I need to extend my visa or transfer from a J1 to an H1-B visa type, will the institution help with this? Will the institution or the PI sponsor this? Currently J1 visas are issued for a maximum of five years, the average length of a postdoc in the US. International postdocs may need to change a J1 to an H1-B visa to complete his/her training if it extends beyond five years.

After the Interview (after you are offered the position):

8. Support for practical issues

‡ * Does the institution have housing facilities or a locator service to help me with finding an accommodation?

‡ * Is there childcare available?

‡ * Is there any family support (e. g. health benefits)?

‡ * Will the institution help me to petition for my family members' visas (J2/H4)?

‡ * If applicable, will you support my petition for permanent residence in the United States? There are multiple ways to petition for permanent residency in the United States (green card). Some of these are sponsored by the institution at no or low cost to them and may be convenient for a postdoc.

* Is there institutional help provided to international postdocs for filing taxes? International postdocs that are not residents for tax purposes must file taxes on distinct forms and may have different exemptions from U.S. residents. This can

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be rather confusing initially and help dealing with these issues is very useful. International postdocs should also enquire about obtaining social security number, driver's license, credit card, and banking information.

9. Career development

† ‡ Is there a merit-based promotion system? If so, is there a different title (e. g. senior postdoc, research associate/scientist) and salary scale reflecting this?

† Will you support my skill set improvement (e. g. taking courses, earning training certificates, learning new technologies, collaborating with other investigators, refining oral/written communication, reviewing papers, applying for independent funding, supervising other people)?

† How will you help me to set up and finalize my individual development plan (IDP), and help me monitor progress with it? The IDP is a written formalization of a professional's goals and expectations. This is regularly checked with performance evaluations and assessment of progress. Mentors can help guide you through this useful process and assure that reasonable goals are set and reached. For more information please view the NPA's [career](#) and [mentoring](#) resources.

† How will you support my chosen career transition (attend scientific meetings, introduce job opportunities, write reference letters, help networking/attend job fair, help with alternative career choices, transfer to another postdoc position)?

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Once you have clarified these issues with the prospective supervisor and others at the host institution, ask to talk separately with every member of the research group and collect similar information. Cross-check. Try to also read what they do not tell you: hesitations, embarrassment or defensiveness on certain topics may indicate problem issues.

In any case, consider that there is no such thing as a “perfect postdoc,” but only a good fit between you and the place where you perform your postdoctoral training. It is up to you to match your needs with an appropriately supportive place where you can learn, work, excel, and, hopefully, also have fun in the process. We hope that our article with our combined experiences will contribute to many successful choices. An additional resource that may help is a Nature podcast on ‘Key questions to ask when you’re moving lab’.

This article was authored by Chiara Gamberi and Derek Scholes, former members of the IPC with the assistance of Claudina Aleman-Stevenson, Sam Castañeda, Alyson Reed, Jicheng Wang, Kenetia Thompson, Samantha Zeitlin and Jenny Karlsson (all former IPC members). The checklist was originally created in October 2004 and updated in February 2019.

Signposts to Living in the United States

(Adapted and modified from "A Guide for New Postdocs and Visitors," an online resource of the Caltech Postdoctoral Scholars/Visitor Services Office)

When choosing to work in the United States as an international postdoc, keep in mind that you will be challenged by many non-scientific obstacles that are cultural or personal in nature. What should you do to make your postdoctoral stay in the United States as productive and satisfying as possible? Signposts to Living in the United States will introduce you to practical tips that will help you understand more about working in the United States as a postdoc. This way, you will be able to minimize misunderstandings and avoid costly and burdensome problems.

Take advantage of the experiences of other international postdocs and learn how to circumvent problems by preparing for them before your arrival as a postdoc to the United States. The information below highlights the major areas that may be important to you during your arrival and transition to the United States. We hope that you will find the information to be useful and informative.

BEFORE YOU ARRIVE

Here are some useful things to know and do prior to your arrival:

- Request a formal appointment letter, contract form and other official documents (like DS2019 in case of J1 visa) from your institution or principal investigator. Read the terms and conditions of your appointment very carefully.
- Bring copies of other important documents (medical, immunization records and prescriptions, school records, home country driver's history or driving extract for getting a driver's license and car insurance) along with your immigration documents.
- Sign up for the local postdoc association (if one is active at your institution) to learn more about professional as well as social events for postdocs and families. Ask for copies of any graduate student guide, institutional newsletter or other publications, for even more information regarding life on campus and the local region.
- Get in touch with the department administrative officer or institute immigration office or head of the local postdoc association to make your transition easier.

Signposts to Living in the United States

MAKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOUR TRAVEL AND ARRIVAL

When offered a postdoctoral appointment, ask your principal investigator if relocation expenses will be reimbursed. If so, ask for specifics in writing. Some institutions maintain an office of travel services with information regarding area hotels, motels, car rentals, and shuttle services, and may also have information regarding per diem rates, exchange rates, and travel warnings. If your appointment includes reimbursement for relocation expenses, please verify with your faculty sponsor whether or not you must use a U.S. airline. Certain funding sources can only reimburse air travel when it is taken on a U.S. airline company.

Many postdoctoral grants also offer relocation allowances to their fellows and sometimes to their families as well. Communicate with your fellowship agencies for more information.

HOUSING

Some institutions maintain a housing office where you can obtain information regarding housing availability and rent prices in the area. Along with the local rental listings, the housing office may also have web links to local newspapers and other resources. If your institution does not have a housing office, check the classified section of the local newspaper in your new community. Most newspapers make these classified apartments and housing ads available online.

Limited transitional housing may be available for incoming postdocs at some institutions. Sometimes these apartments are furnished and are close to campus. They are typically available on a short-term basis and on a first-come, first served basis.

Tips:

- If possible, visit the place before finalizing the lease agreement or transferring funds.
- Please note that most landlords and rental agencies may require a good referral and a security deposit and/or the first and last month's rent.
- A co-signer or a vouching person (U.S. citizens) may also be requested for signing a rental agreement.
- Check the facilities that are included and excluded in the lease.
- Most landlords insist you purchase rental insurance to protect your belongings. Generally, rental insurance is cheaper especially if you use the same company that insures your car.

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OPENING UTILITY ACCOUNTS

When renting a place, you are most likely responsible for setting up the utilities (e.g. electricity, water, gas, telephone). You need to call the local provider for each of these services and to open account services with them. They usually request some titles from their customers: a social security number (SSN), and often a proof of residency (lease agreement or rental insurance). This can be rather confusing when you first come to the United States but remember that usually your institution or your advisor can vouch for you to overcome these seemingly contradictory requests while you get an SSN and some credit history in the United States.

Tips:

- Before approaching the provider, check with your landlord regarding the companies that provide local services for best offers.

HEALTH INSURANCE AND ACCESS TO CARE

Most U.S. citizens obtain health insurance coverage through their employers, as there is only limited coverage available for U.S. citizens through the government (Medicaid/Medicare). Be sure to ask your PI or host institution (mostly HR/ benefits office) what your health benefits (if any) will be. Many employers require their employees to pay a portion of the total cost of health insurance through payroll deduction. Many provide access to health insurance for family members of the employee, but typically at full cost. Some employers provide a range of health insurance options, such as health maintenance organizations, preferred provider plans, and traditional indemnity. Sometimes prescription coverage, vision, and dental care are treated separately. These plans may require additional payments at the time that health care services are provided. Most employers have a benefits summary available to explain these options in more detail.

If your institution will not pay for any of your health insurance, you may still be able to purchase coverage through a group plan at your institution. Check with the personnel or human resources office to confirm. If you cannot obtain group coverage through your institution, some membership associations may offer coverage. For example, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) offers group health insurance to its members. This coverage is available to postdocs who join NAGPS.

In the case of bona fide medical emergencies, U.S. law requires hospitals to provide emergency care regardless of citizenship status or health insurance coverage. Do not hesitate to obtain emergency services for you or your family if a crisis occurs.

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Tips:

- Make sure that the health plan you have opted for meets the requirements for your visa status.
- Medical insurance in the United States is generally expensive, so set up your insurance and primary health care provider sooner than later.
- Familiarize yourself with health insurance coverage in terms of deductibles, co-payment, co-insurance, etc.

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Postdocs need to obtain a social security card in order to get paid for their work in the United States. Your social security number is used to keep a record of your earnings. Before filling out an application, you may want to check-in at the personnel or human resources or an international office at your institution, for assistance to file an application and to avoid any substantial delay in obtaining your social security number. Sometimes, additional delays may be possible, as the Social Security Administration must receive data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS, previously INS) when individuals first enter the United States. We recommend going to the Social Security office two weeks after your arrival to allow for information transfer. You should bring your passport, immigration documents and your appointment letter from your home institution to the Social Security office. It may take anywhere from three to six weeks to receive your social security number; however, you should ask the personnel office if your institution will still pay your salary while you are in the process of applying for a number.

You will receive your social security card in the mail. Banks, landlords, and other businesses may sometimes ask for your social security number. Be sure to verify why the number is needed and use discretion when giving it out.

Tips:

- Before filling your application, make sure that you have all the required documents and recent I94 form.
- **Don't disclose your SSN over email or over the phone.** Someone illegally using your SSN and assuming your identity can cause a lot of problems.

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BANK ACCOUNT

After your arrival, directly contact the local bank branch for opening an account. You are required to bring an appointment letter, passport and other documents for account opening. If you need any assistance, contact the international office or postdoc association at your institution.

Tips:

- Familiarize yourself with different types of accounts – saving and checking accounts; taxable and non-taxable accounts, etc.
- If you need a checkbook or debit card, you may have to contact the local branch or apply through online banking.

DRIVER'S LICENSE/ STATE ID

In the United States, the laws governing drivers are handled by the individual states. In general, if you are employed here or become a resident, you will need to obtain a state driver's license within a certain time period. If you are a visitor with a valid driver's license from your home state or home country, you may be able to drive in your new state of residence without getting a state driver's license, as long as your home country's license remains in effect and valid. In some states, you may be able to drive using your license from your home country if you have an international driver's permit (IDP). You may obtain the IDP from and while still in your home country. If you are an international postdoc or visitor at your institution but are receiving your income directly from an outside source, the procedures for obtaining a driver license may be different.

You should contact the local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) for more details. Most telephone directories have these local, state and federal government listings published in the blue pages. Every state government has a website, and information about drivers' licenses and other applicable state laws may be found on these web pages. Lastly, note that some insurance companies will require a state driver's license sooner than the DMV/MVA in order to insure your vehicle.

In order to obtain a driver's license, you will generally need to take both a computer-based knowledge test and on-road driving test, along with passing a vision exam. Most states charge a fee and require various documents verifying your residence and identity, such as a passport, visa copy, SSN, recent I94, lease agreement, utility bill, etc. In some states, you are required to present a home country driver's license or IDP and driver's history (an extract from the home country).

Signposts to Living in the United States

Tips:

The laws for obtaining a driver's license varies from state to state. Depending on your state of residence in the United States, prepare the documents that are required for filing the driver's license application.

- Carefully read the instructions provided on the state DMV webpage.
- If required, take brush-up classes from local driving schools.
- When taking the road driving test, note that vehicle insurance is required

In many states, a state ID can be used for identification purposes in place of a driver's license. Documentary requirements are often the same where identity, lawful status, proof of state residency and SSN are required. Certain cities like Chicago may also offer local identification programs for city residents.

Postdocs should also note that effective May 3, 2023, a REAL ID compliant identity document is required to board domestic flights. The documentation requirements vary from state to state, but often two pieces of proof-of-address are required.

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

Once you have bought a car (purchased or leased), it needs to be inspected and registered before you apply for auto insurance. Many states also require that you have liability insurance in order to drive a car in that state. Securing liability and comprehensive insurance can be very expensive, especially if you have never driven before. First-time drivers can expect high insurance rates for the first 18 months they drive. After that period, if your driving record is good, you can expect your rates to drop somewhat. If you have driven overseas and have written proof of your good driving record, your insurance rates may decrease. So, compare the premium rates from many national insurance companies before choosing a policy.

Tips:

- Car needs to be inspected yearly and in some states, you may also require annual renewal of the number plate.
- Check vehicle identification number (VIN), if you are thinking of buying a used car.

Signposts to Living in the United States

TAXES

The U.S. federal government and many states collect a tax on U.S. income, which includes wages and scholarships. These taxes will be automatically deducted from your paycheck every month. Your institution should provide each employee with an itemized statement of taxable income for the prior calendar year (i.e. W2, 1099, 1042S or 592B) around mid-February. At the end of each calendar year, every taxpayer in the United States must file an appropriate tax return form depending on his or her income source. This tax form is basically a worksheet reporting all income and calculating the appropriate taxes owed. The deadline for filing a tax form is April 15 each year for those who received an income in the United States during the prior year (January 1 - December 31).

Each non-immigrant visa type has certain tax consequences for international postdocs. Depending on your eligibility, a tax treaty between your country and the United States may provide an exception from paying U.S. federal taxes and payroll taxes for a limited amount of time. Some states are excluded from state taxes. Please note that for some countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and perhaps others, the tax treaty is valid only if your stay in the United States does not exceed exactly two years from your date of arrival.

That is, if you stay one day beyond two years, you will be responsible for all past taxes. You may choose to waive the treaty benefits and pay the federal taxes if you know that you will be in the United States beyond two years. For your information, the tax treaties between countries are based on the international reciprocity rule: the United States will treat citizens from your country the same way your country treats U.S. citizens working in your home country. The payroll staff in your institution's human resources office can explain your individual tax situation. However, they are not generally allowed to offer any tax advice. Some international offices may organize tax seminars or even tax filing help during the first few months of the year, so we encourage you to find out what is the situation in your institution.

Links to information regarding international postdocs and taxes:

- [Internal Revenue Service](#) (I.R.S., the U.S. tax agency). Tax forms are also available at local U.S. Post Offices.
- [U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens](#): For use in preparing federal tax returns
- [U.S. Tax Treaties](#)
- [Withholding of Tax on Nonresident Aliens and Foreign Entities](#)
- Stanford [Tax Information for International Students and Scholars](#)
- [UCLA Postdoc Tax Information](#)
- University of Texas at Austin: [Social Security & Taxes](#) (non-resident aliens)

Signposts to Living in the United States

U.S. CULTURE

For selected information regarding U.S. culture, see International Student's [website](#). This website covers topics such as basic facts and statistics about the U.S. culture, national holidays, noteworthy places and people, and etiquette.

GENERAL TIPS:

- Credit card: Without credit history/score it might be difficult to get a credit card. Initially, referral works better with lesser rejection probability. Please note that you will often need an SSN to apply for a credit card
- Moving with a spouse and children: Check with your HR office for dependent health insurance, child care facilities and allowances offered by your institution.
- Familiarize yourself with the geographical location of your institute and be prepared for the seasonal weather changes.
- The Metric System: You will notice that for everyday life, the United States still uses the English measurement system. Here is a useful site regarding metric and conversions:
 - [Math connect](#)
- General Resources: This website is offered by for-profit commercial ventures. No endorsement is implied.
 - [American Immigration Center](#)

Building Credit

Nowadays, credit is required for almost everything from getting a cell phone, to renting an apartment and applying for a car or a loan. In the United States, credit cards are almost an essential part of modern daily life and are commonly used for transactions such as renting a car or purchasing airline tickets.

However, credit cards are more than just a convenience in the United States – credit card usage is also the primary means of establishing a credit history. Without a credit history, most U.S. financial institutions are reluctant to extend credit to foreign nationals. This makes it difficult to obtain financing for a vehicle, for example, and many international postdocs end up paying cash in full for such purchases. One of the best ways to build your credit history is to apply for and responsibly use a credit card. It's important to keep in mind that not all cards are the same. Each credit card comes with different rates, features, benefits and fees. Make sure to research all of your options to find a card offering the most benefits like low interest rate, no annual fee, cash rewards and a reasonable credit limit. You should also pay close attention to the billing cycles to make sure you understand the payment policies, so you can avoid any potential fees. Listed below are options for obtaining a credit card:

- Apply for and obtain a credit card.
 - You can start with a Costco membership for which you have to pay an annual fee of around \$55 and this comes with a credit card application tied with Costco.
 - Try applying for a Discover credit card, even with a zero-credit history Discover offers credit card with low credit levels in the beginning.
 - Obtain a charge card through a major department store (e.g. Macy's). As a foreign national, such cards are easier to obtain than credit cards. Although you will only be able to use charge cards at the individual department store, this can be a quick and inexpensive means to establish a credit history in the United States and can make it easier for you to obtain other types of credit (e.g. vehicle loan, traditional credit card).
 - If you have no credit or low credit scores, the [Deserve Classic](#) is a top contender. No security deposit is required, and the Deserve Classic offers a credit line that goes as high as \$1,500, depending on eligibility.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

As postdocs new to the country, it may be daunting to meet new people or form connections. Some suggestions for getting to know others could be to get involved with your institution's postdoctoral association's social events or to join [Meetup groups](#).

Building Credit

- [Petal Visa](#) issues credit cards based on applicants' income, expenses, savings and debts. You must be a U.S. resident with a valid social security number or an individual taxpayer identification number to qualify.
- *Ask your university to set up a program with a local bank or credit union to provide foreign nationals access to credit cards.* Such a program has been implemented at the University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB), the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston and at several other institutions.
- *Apply for a secured credit card.* This requires you to open and maintain a savings account as security for your line of credit. You are then given a line of credit as a percentage of the amount you put into savings, typically ranging from 50-100 percent. A secured credit card is easier to get than an unsecured credit card, however the annual percentage rate on a secured card is often higher. Avoid applying for a secured credit card from an un-reputable source ([read more](#)).
- *Become a secondary holder on another person's credit card.* As a secondary cardholder, you get the same purchasing power as the primary cardholder, but the primary cardholder is contractually responsible for the bill. The account and the payment history will, however, be detailed on YOUR credit report. This can be an excellent way to establish credit if the account is well-managed. However, if the account goes unpaid, then this information will hurt your credit score. [View](#) the pros and cons of being a secondary cardholder.

Beginners Guide to Income Taxes for International Postdocs

[Beginners Guide to Income Taxes for International Postdocs](#) is a separate resource.

Been There, Done That: International Voices Interviews

Read the anecdotes and advice from seasoned veterans who have come to the United States to do a postdoctoral fellowship. These interviews were conducted by the NPA's IPC.



Name: Achouak Achour, Ph. D.

Home Country: Tunisia

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO THE UNITED STATES TO DO YOUR POSTDOC?

When I first came with my husband and one year old, I was so tired because I did a long 20-hour trip to the United States. Getting the visa to come here was super easy because all the paperwork was taken care of. It was my first time coming to the United States, so the first few months were very hard for us to adapt to the American life. People are very different. Although, I was in France for four years, compared to France, there was still a huge cultural difference. The first month, my husband stayed with the baby at home and later, we found a daycare. I looked on google and asked around for daycares.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE SO FAR?

Language was definitely a challenge, but I am still learning. Technology is different from what I am used to in the laboratory. Sometimes it's still too hard to understand some of the more complicated bioinformatics stuff, but I am trying to learn. Thankfully, the lab is mostly international and in interacting with others, we have all become friends. People have been welcoming.

Been There, Done That: International Voices Interviews

HOW DO YOU STAY CONNECTED WITH FAMILY IN TUNISIA?

I haven't found many people from Tunisia in America. It would be nice to have a group of friends here. I don't feel homesick as much because I have my family here. Sometimes when I do miss home, I call my parents every other day to check on them. I keep in touch and ask them how they are because they both have health issues.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR SPARE TIME?

On the weekends, I spend time with my family. Often, I play with the baby to destress. But it's not always easy to be a mother, wife and a postdoc. Managing it all is stressful for sure. We flew home for three weeks last time. It was tough, but it's good to see family and enjoy. It keeps the connection alive.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT BEING HERE?

I am most grateful for the opportunity to advance my career. There are many trainings and opportunities that I don't think I would have had elsewhere. I enjoy going to meetings and conferences and meeting very smart people. My advice to fellow postdocs would be to make best use of the opportunities available to you here.

Been There, Done That: International Voices Interviews



Name: Cristina Florio, Ph.D.

Home Country: Italy

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES?

After my doctorate, I arrived by myself from Rome. One of my mentors in Italy helped me make a connection and after the interview I was accepted into the lab whose work I closely followed. When I realized I was coming to the United States to do research in a thought-provoking environment with cutting edge technology, I was very excited. I am still very excited. Although, I had visited the United States for travel before, I was looking forward to a change of environment. I wanted to learn as much as possible. I knew and still know that this was an opportunity to improve my English and this was an important step in my career.

HOW DID YOU FIGURE OUT WHERE TO STAY?

An ex-coworker helped suggest where I should stay and what places to avoid. I was aware of an Italian group on Facebook that helps us transition smoothly into the city. I personally did not utilize that group because I wanted to experience American life and American work for myself.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT THE TRANSITION FROM ITALY TO THE UNITED STATES?

For me transitioning into the United States was relatively easy because I was already used to the big city, with different people and different cultures. But, before I came to the United States, I tried to watch a lot of American shows like Grey's Anatomy and Friends to improve my English. I thought the shows were just

Been There, Done That: International Voices Interviews

shows, but reality in America is very close to what is portrayed on TV. I am determined to assimilate into American culture, so I purposely try to have a diverse group of friends, although sometimes I enjoy meeting my Italian friends for dinner. It is great to be surrounded by your community and speak your language. As far as craving Italian food goes, I am not a picky eater. I love seafood and enjoy American food while I can still have it!

DO YOU EVER EXPERIENCE HOMESICKNESS?

For the most part, I have not experienced that much of homesickness. I think, sometimes, it does hit me, as to how far away from home I am, but I feel at home here anyway.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR INCOMING AND CURRENT INTERNATIONAL POSTDOCS?

I feel that personally for me, the language barrier wasn't the greatest challenge. It was the overall feeling of being new, experiencing a different environment and a brand-new life that overwhelms. I would advise you to just BREATHE. Take a step back and slow down if you must. Make your mental and physical health a priority. I try to go running, swimming, do yoga to manage lab and life. I think everyone needs to take ten minutes per day to themselves to relax. It's very easy to burn out, especially since you are here alone and without family. Do your research about the place in advance, don't assume things about the place you are coming to.

Be open and enjoy your experience.

Been There, Done That: International Voices Interviews



Name: Chitralla Kumaraswamy Naidu, Ph.D.

Home Country: India

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE TRANSITIONING FROM INDIA TO THE UNITED STATES?

When I first applied for the J1 visa to come here, things were straightforward. When I first arrived however, I experienced a bit of a culture shock. It was a different land, different people. But I am grateful that a few American and Indian friends helped me out and made the process much easier. They suggested places to live, connected me to other Indian postdocs here. When I first came here, a professor gave me temporary accommodation before I found my own place. I am lucky to have support like that.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE THUS FAR?

The biggest challenge thus far has been as a vegetarian, it is very hard to get food I can eat regularly in America. Other than that, things are fine. The language barrier is not a big barrier to Indians for the most part, because we have always spoken English in India. The only problem may be the accent, but it's not something we can't overcome. For the first four months, I was very homesick. I even expressed to my PI as well that I wanted to go home, but I figured that out by talking to my family everyday by Skype. Thanks to technology, I can sustain my relationships back home and don't feel the strain of homesickness quite as much. Now, I have found a sense of community here. I have a lot of Indian friends and that helps me feel connected. I feel this is my home now and I feel less alone. I think a lot of stress for us International postdocs is transitioning from J1 to H1B to obtaining a Green Card. That is always at the back of my mind.

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WHAT HAS BEEN THE BEST PART OF YOUR POSTDOC EXPERIENCE?

Science in America is the best. People value talent in America. You can reach the peak of success here. There are many opportunities to explore and many career paths to take. My experience being a postdoc in South Carolina was different from what was expected. People were very warm and welcoming. They would always stop to say hello and ask how I was doing. I am very happy that I went for the first time to a small town and not a large city.

BEING AN INTERNATIONAL POSTDOC CAN BE QUITE STRESSFUL. HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED TO COPE WITH STRESS? ANY TIPS THAT YOU CAN SHARE WITH US?

I manage stress by talking to my family. We are very close, and I discuss everything with them. They support me no matter what. I work hard during the week and make sure that I take a real break during the weekends. I have a community here to help support me as well. We get together often. In my free time, I watch movies. I am starting to travel a little more and explore America.

ANY ADVICE FOR CURRENT AND NEW INTERNATIONAL POSTDOCS?

Be open to accepting that there is more than one career path here. Be open to all opportunities. When you first come here, go through the website of the university or institute, reach out for help, people are always willing to help. Ask advice from professionals, don't believe hearsay.

For example, you will get plenty of advice about visa status from everybody, make decisions wisely and get help from the experts. Make use of your University immigration office or your postdoc career development office for any help. Reach out.



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