Finding a Postdoc Lab In the Sciences

In many scientific fields, an academic postdoctoral research position is the most common next step for graduating PhDs. For research-based academic careers, doing a postdoc is almost always essential and choosing the right lab can be a major determinant of success. Postdoc experience can also be helpful for teaching-based academic careers as well as research-based industry careers.

Identifying labs of interest: Know your professional goals!

- **Research topic:** Are you passionate about this topic? Can you learn AND contribute knowledge?
- **Track record:** Where are former postdocs from this lab? Do current postdocs seem satisfied?
- **Mentoring Style:** Think about what you need to be successful - is this advisor a logical choice?
- **Institution:** What resources does the university/department have? What is the school’s reputation?
- **Funding:** What is the current and likely future funding situation of the lab?
- **Group dynamics:** Would I realistically work well with this PI and the current members of the lab?
- **Personal:** Will I be happy living in this region? Will this lab support the work/life balance I desire?

Making connections and applying: 3 main ways

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Cold-outreach tips

- Conferences are a great time to establish connections with labs of interest so you are a known when you apply. All lab members are good contacts: PI, postdocs and grad students.
- UChicagoGRAD recommends making initial contact with lab of interest ONE YEAR before your expected defense date.
- Email Subject should include “UChicago” (or your current PI if the recipient is likely to know their name): and “Postdoc Position.” Use email body as cover letter and attach CV as pdf.
- Cover letters must be tailored to each individual lab. Do your research to identify specifically why you want to work there and highlight competencies you bring that help the lab.
- Follow-up if you do not hear back for two weeks with polite reminder as a reply to your original email and C.V. re-attached.

On-campus interviews

- Research presentation to lab or larger seminar group is often the most important part: tailor your talk to audience’s interests
- Read publications beforehand and ask questions about the research that demonstrate your knowledge and interest.
- Get lab members to open up about their experience
- Send Thank You notes to everyone you meet within one day

Notes on funding

- It is essential to know the funding health of the group. Obtaining your own funding as a postdoc is also important to success.
- Know current funding sources
  - Government grant info is available online
    - NIH RePORTER
    - NSF Award Search
  - It is okay to ask about funding during your interview
- Plan to obtain more funding
  - Identify any institutional grants available for each lab
  - Mention any interest in applying for specific grant funding in cover letter
  - Look for external sources of postdoc funding to bring with you

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