

Things I wish I had known about Post-Doctoral Fellowships

So, you have done what often feels impossible in academia, you got the grant! Congratulations! Post-doctoral fellowships offer you a once in a lifetime opportunity to study groundbreaking, cutting-edge research questions, while simultaneously allotting you the time and money to examine them close up. As a recipient of an NSF SPRF Fellowship, I received an additional \$15,000 annually in research funds – an amount that might seem miniscule to independent PI's, but as a post-doc, was a monumental steppingstone to managing my own budget. In addition to those research funds, I received a pretty substantial pay increase (\$54,000 annually). And while those financial benefits will never pail in comparison to the insanely phenomenal experience of running your own study, there are some costs that came with accepting those funds that I wish I had been prepared for. The following are things I wish I had known before receiving my NSF fellowship, that I know now. However, the knowledge of these things would never, and should never deter anyone from applying for, or accepting a fellowship, they are only to inform and prepare individuals for what might come:

1. NSF Fellowships are routed directly to you, and this can make your affiliation with your University very messy.

NSF Fellowships are unique in that they do not route through the University system, but rather go directly to your bank account. You request a paycheck every three months, and that paycheck is deposited from NSF into your bank account. Every University system is different, but many do not see you as having a financial association with them anymore, and therefore, do not offer you benefits. You may find that you are charged to use services as an external user. **Ask these questions ahead of time.** I know some University systems have found ways to circumvent this issue so that their post-doctoral fellows may remain affiliated with the University, but the prospect of losing health insurance was not something I was prepared for, so I encourage others to find out what their University's policy is ahead of time.

2. Taxes are confusing... and also messy.

It seems that, in asking other NSF grant recipients, no one is entirely clear on the tax process once an NSF grant is received (e.g. some think the research funds are taxable income, others don't); however, we all set aside a substantial chunk of money each pay period from our paychecks. I file my taxes with big companies, and trust me, they didn't make me feel a great deal of confidence that they had handled a situation similar to this in the past. One thing is for sure: NSF does not provide you with any tax documents at the end of the year.

3. Research funds and salary are deposited together – keep them separate.

This is also a messy concept, as part of your research funds may be allocated to health insurance, retirement, conference travel, etc. (see budget justification). Therefore, there seems to be a sort of natural overlap between your salary and your research funds. I urge you to keep them separate and to keep diligent track of your research funds. While I have yet to report these (although I am only halfway through my fellowship), for my own sanity it is helpful to track how much I have paid participants. For example, I don't want to overpay for MRI costs and start accidentally pulling from my personal account. Likewise, I don't want to cut recruitment short because I think my funds are low, when in reality I just spent too much on groceries that much. I recommend creating two accounts: one for your personal funds and another for research funds. I then recommend keeping a spreadsheet of every invoice you spend from research funds.

I hope you find this information helpful! If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the information provided here, or if you have a similar/different experience, I encourage you to contact me:

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