SURPAS Family – Building Community and Advocating for Postdocs with Families

Gina Bouchard and Sarah Eagleman, Stanford University, CA

Identifying Challenges

Background

The challenges of postdoctoral studies can be amplified for postdocs who have, or plan to have, a family during this stepping stone in their career. A recent survey administered by the Stanford University Postdoctoral Association (SURPAS) shows that nearly half of postdocs with dependents who responded to the survey report that their access to professional advancement opportunities (e.g. departmental seminars, scientific conferences, etc.) has been hindered by their family obligations. Although most Stanford postdocs are satisfied with their mentor’s consideration of their families, there is still a long way to go to make the academic setting a more inclusive place for postdocs with dependents. We recognize these are likely universal challenges for the postdoc community.

The SURPAS Family committee was created in 2017 with the aim of understanding and solving these challenges. SURPAS Family aims to create and advocate for resources to make the family lives of postdocs with dependents more compatible with their academic lives. We hope our efforts can energize and inspire actions for increasing the visibility and strengthen the experience of postdocs with dependents nationwide.

Methods

The SURPAS Family survey was designed by Stanford postdocs for Stanford postdocs with dependents. The family survey consisted of 32 questions and was conducted online from February to May 2018. A total of 282 responses were recorded, representing a response rate of 27% for postdoc with dependents and 12% of the total postdoc population.

Results

The results show that close to 50% of the postdocs with dependents have been hindered from participating in research activities, departmental events, or scientific conferences during their postdoctoral studies due to family obligations (A). Some examples of difficulties are:

- Many departmental seminars and most of the networking events are held in the late afternoon, which may conflict with childcare hours
- Retreats are often organized during the weekends, which leave families without childcare options
- Many postdoc classes are taught in the evenings only

In addition, many postdocs with dependents are below the poverty line in Palo Alto (B). The Family survey revealed that the international community had lower incomes compared to citizens or permanent residents (C). Most relevant, it is nearly impossible to cover childcare expenses in the Bay Area with the Stanford postdoc salary (D). Living expenses (vertical blue bars) include transportation, food, housing, and utilities (horizontal red bars indicate household gross salary, so distance between blue bar and red bar represents disposable income).

Creating Solutions

At Stanford several administrative and grassroots efforts have been launched to address these challenges. Below are several pathways we have explored to enrich the lives of Stanford postdocs with families.

SURPAS Family: A committee created to understand the challenges, as well as improve the lives of postdocs with dependents. Since 2017 we have organized a survey of postdoctoral needs and used results to advocate on their behalf. A series of family friendly events for postdocs with dependents were organized specifically for this community - which drew the largest crowd to date of postdocs with families to our campus (see photos). Many stated this was first time in a long time, postdocs with families felt like their needs were finally understood.

SURPAS: A volunteer advocacy forum with the aim of enhancing and enriching the experience of postdocs at Stanford. Several members of this group have supported the founding and mission of SURPAS Family.

Social media: SURPAS Family created its own Facebook page where families can exchange information about family friendly activities, organize play dates, and find resources. We have also added pages on childcare and child friendly activities to a Wiki page accessible to all Stanford postdocs.

Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA) The administrative hub for all postdoctoral appointments at Stanford University. The office of postdoctoral affairs supports postdocs in all aspects of their training as they develop their independent careers. They are working with SURPAS family as well as other administrative groups and committees to better address the needs of postdocs with dependents.

Stanford Childcare Working Group: A recently formed committee whose aim to identify the childcare needs at Stanford and provide solutions to the challenges faced by faculty, staff, postdocs, and graduate students. Recommendations will be provided to university leadership.

Stanford Affordability Task Force: Committee that aims to better understand the challenges, identify potential solutions, and learn other employers’ tactics for addressing affordability issues in the Bay Area. Both SURPAS, SURPAS Family, and the Stanford Childcare Working Group all make recommendations to this committee.