UC Postdocs are Worth $50K (and Then Some...)

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Postdoctoral researchers at the University of California are an invaluable component of the research enterprise. They have completed PhD degrees, are experts in their fields of research, and carry the primary responsibility for training and teaching students who join the lab.
Yet UC postdocs remain woefully under-compensated. Though the National Academy of Sciences has recommended raising postdoc pay above $50,000 a year, the average salary for a postdoc (the majority of which are in their 30s and 40s) at the University of California is $47,186 and the starting wage for a postdoc is $43,692. Despite ten or more years of higher education, some postdocs effectively make less than $15 per hour because of the long hours.

Now the Department of Labor appears poised to offer some financial relief for UC postdocs and other researcher job titles (such as Specialists) as well as 13.5 million additional workers. Last year the DOL proposed to increase the threshold for overtime pay for salaried employees from $23,660 a year to $50,440. But in their public comment on the proposed overtime rule, the University of California asserts that postdocs are “entry level academic employees...who should be excluded from the proposed rule.”

The University of California then proceeded to use talking points straight out of the Chamber of Commerce and Republican congressional playbook by claiming that “higher compensation for trainees... will necessarily result in the placement of fewer of them in our research institutions.”

Despite these claims, UC’s position is not backed up by reality. As recently as six years ago, postdocs were warned that salary increases in a new union contract would lead to a decrease in positions, but in fact the number of postdocs at UC has increased under the new salary scale. Another analysis of postdoc hiring trends nationwide over the past two decades found that annual salary increases for postdocs (which included two 10 percent increases and one 25 percent increase) did not lead to fewer postdoc positions.
UC researchers produce an average of five inventions a day and win grant applications that bring in nearly $6 billion a year in research funding. But postdoc compensation makes up only a fraction of 1 percent of those research dollars. Given this reality, it seems the UC may have better luck looking towards its executive ranks (John Falle, the author of UC’s public comment opposing the overtime rules makes $285K in his role as Associate VP of Federal Government Relations) if it wants to make a credible argument about compensation costs impacting the quality of research.

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