A Statement of Best Practices in the Mentor/Postdoctoral Trainee Relationship

Wake Forest University Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

This document is based on a statement of best practices in the mentor/trainee relationship produced by the AAMC (“Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors” http://www.aamc.org/research/postdoccompact/). It has been modified to reflect the postdoctoral experience at Wake Forest University, and approved by the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs and the Postdoctoral Scholar Steering Committee as a set of “best practices” intended to provide guidance for new mentors and trainees.

Postdoctoral training is an important element in the preparation of those with advanced degrees (Ph.D. and M.D.s) for career advancement as scientific professionals. Postdoctoral trainees typically join an institution to further their training in a chosen discipline after recently obtaining their terminal degree (e.g., Ph.D., M.D., D.V.M.). The specifics of this training are based on the discipline of the trainee, and may vary depending on the career objectives of the trainee. The postdoctoral training experience is undertaken as an apprenticeship where the trainee works under the supervision of a more senior mentor, or mentors. The postdoctoral trainee may undertake scholarship, research, service, and teaching activities that together provide training experiences that are essential for career advancement and preparation for a role as an independent researcher, teacher or industry leader.

Core Tenets of Postdoctoral Training

Institutional Commitment

A successful postdoctoral training experience entails a commitment by the institution to maintaining the highest standards of training and to providing a program sufficient to ensure, that when completed, the trainee can function independently as a scientific professional. This is embodied by the establishment of the Wake Forest University Office of Postdoctoral Affairs (OPA), which is concerned with matters relevant to the support of postdoctoral trainees. The OPA works in conjunction with two groups, the Postdoctoral Affairs Steering Committee and the Postdoctoral Association (PDA). The Postdoctoral Affairs Steering Committee is composed of faculty and postdoctoral trainees who act as an advisory board to the Director of the OPA. The Postdoctoral Association serves as a representative body for Postdoctoral trainee activities. The Officers of the PDA serve in an ex officio capacity on the Steering committee, thereby providing an information conduit to the Director.
Quality Postdoctoral Training

In the sciences, a characteristic of a successful trainee is the ability to independently formulate meaningful hypotheses, design and conduct interpretable experiments, adhere to good laboratory practices, analyze results critically, understand the broad significance of their research findings, and uphold the highest ethical standards in research. The development of additional skills—including oral and written communication, grant writing, leadership and laboratory management—are considered integral to this training.

In the arts and humanities, mentoring is no less important in establishing a career path. Training in this circumstance may involve the production of scholarly works, research related to the specific discipline as well as teaching, thus mentoring is equally as important as in scientific fields.

Importance of Mentoring in Postdoctoral Training

Effective mentoring is critical for postdoctoral training and requires that the primary mentor dedicate time to ensure personal and professional development of the trainee. Successful mentors build a relationship with the trainee that is characterized by excellent communication, mutual respect and understanding. The attributes of a good mentor include being approachable, available, and willing to share his/her knowledge; listening effectively; providing encouragement and constructive criticism; offering expertise and guidance; and making available professional networks and contacts.

Foster Breadth and Flexibility in Career Choices

A successful postdoctoral experience includes training experiences of sufficient breadth to ensure that trainees are prepared to pursue a wide range of professional career options. Effective and regular career guidance is a characteristic of excellent programs.

Successful training experiences also often include the following specific best practices by the mentor and trainee:
Career Development

As a trainee:
• I acknowledge that successful trainees take primary responsibility for the development of their own careers. I recognize that this entails a realistic examination of career opportunities, and I need to follow a path that matches my individual skills, values, and interests.

• I understand that the completion of my training requires persistence and commitment as well as skill and intelligence, and that a productive training experience requires active engagement in all phases of my training experience.

• I understand that success involves seeking opportunities outside my specific research focus (e.g. professional development seminars and workshops in oral communication, scientific writing, and teaching) in order to expand my opportunities and to develop the full set of professional skills necessary to be successful for my chosen career.

• I recognize that I have embarked on a career requiring “lifelong learning.” To meet this obligation I must stay abreast of the latest developments in my specialized field through reading the literature, regular attendance at relevant seminar series, and attendance at scientific meetings. I recognize that this is part of becoming a member of the larger professional community.

As a mentor:
• I acknowledge that the postdoctoral period is a time of advanced training intended to develop the skills needed to promote the career of the postdoctoral trainee.

• I will strive to maintain a relationship with the postdoctoral trainee that is based on trust and mutual respect. I acknowledge that open communication and periodic formal performance reviews, conducted at least annually, will help ensure that the expectations of both parties are met.

• I will ensure that the postdoctoral trainee has sufficient opportunities to acquire the skills necessary to become an expert in an agreed upon area of investigation.

• I will encourage the interaction of the postdoctoral trainee with fellow scientists both intra- and extramurally and encourage the trainee’s attendance at professional meetings to network and present research findings.

• I recognize that there are multiple career options available for a postdoctoral trainee and will provide assistance in exploring appropriate options. I recognize that not all postdoctoral trainees will become academic faculty. To prepare a postdoctoral trainee for other career paths, I will direct her/him to the resources that explore non-academic careers, and discuss these options. I will encourage them to take full advantage of teacher training and other specialized training opportunities and workshops that may help the postdoctoral trainee to transition into these other career paths.

Research Conduct

As a trainee:
• I will respect and familiarize myself with the relevant ethical standards of my profession, including compliance with all institutional and

As a mentor:
• I will promote all ethical standards for conducting research including compliance with all institutional and federal regulations as they relate
federal regulations as they relate to responsible conduct in research, privacy and human subjects research, animal care and use, laboratory safety, and use of radioisotopes. I recognize that this commitment includes asking for guidance when presented with ethical or compliance uncertainties and reporting on breeches of ethical or compliance standards by me and/or others. I recognize that this responsibility extends to interactions between academia and industry – I will deal with any conflicts between these disciplines with transparency.

- I will show respect for and will work professionally and collegially with my coworkers, support staff, and other individuals with whom I interact.

Research and Scholarly Projects

As a trainee:
- I will develop a mutually defined research project with my mentor that includes well-defined goals and timelines. Ideally, this project should be outlined and agreed upon at the time of the initial appointment, with timelines that are mutually agreed upon.

- I am committed to providing a clear record of my research activities that will allow reproduction of my results by others. I will perform my research activities conscientiously, maintain good research records, and catalog and maintain all tangible research materials that result from the research project.

- I will endeavor to assume progressive responsibility and management of my research project(s) as it matures. I recognize that assuming responsibility for the conduct of research projects is a critical step on the path to independence.

As a mentor:
- I will ensure that a mutually agreed upon set of expectations and goals are in place at the outset of the postdoctoral training period, and I will work with the postdoctoral trainee to create an individual career development plan.

- I will provide a training environment that is suited to the individual needs of the postdoctoral trainee in order to ensure his/her personal and professional growth.

- I will encourage a progressive increase in the level of responsibility and independence to facilitate the transition to a fully independent career.
### Research Productivity and Publication

#### As a trainee:
- I will seek regular feedback on my performance and ask for a formal evaluation at least annually.
- I will have open and timely discussions with my mentor concerning the dissemination of research findings and the distribution of research materials to third parties. I will work through the industry relations office to ensure that obligations are honored that result from the receipt of materials and resources from others.
- I will commit to the standards of publication within my chosen field. I understand that a clear sign of productivity and a successful training experience is the publication of my scholarship in respected research journals.
- I will share credit appropriately with other members of my working group in accord with standards of my field.

#### As a mentor:
- I will provide the trainee with the required guidance and mentoring, and will seek the assistance of other faculty and departmental/institutional resources when necessary.
- Although a good mentor is expected to provide guidance and education in technical areas, I recognize that successful mentors also educate the postdoctoral trainee by example and by providing access to formal opportunities/programs in complementary areas necessary for a successful career.
- I will ensure that the research performed by a postdoctoral trainee is submitted for publication in a timely manner and that she/he receive appropriate credit for the work she/he performs. Good mentors acknowledge contributions of their trainees to the development of any intellectual property and clearly define future access to tangible research materials according to institutional policy.

### Upon Completion of Postdoctoral Training

#### As a trainee:
- At the end of my appointment, in accordance with institutional policy, I will leave behind all original notebooks, computerized files, and tangible research materials so that other individuals can carry on related research.
- I can make copies of my notebooks and computerized files, and have access to tangible research materials which I helped to generate during my postdoctoral appointment according to institutional policy. I also understand that original data is the property of the institution and must be archived in a format that is easily accessible to the laboratory director or program leader.

#### As a mentor:
- I will commit to being a supportive colleague to postdoctoral trainees as they transition the next stage of their career and to the extent possible, throughout their professional life. I recognize that the role of a mentor continues after the formal training period.
• I will also work with my mentor to submit the research results for publication in a timely manner. This is to my benefit as I build my reputation as an active member of my profession.

These guidelines are provided as a help for new postdocs and faculty mentors and as a reminder to more senior mentors of the best practices in postdoctoral training. This document was approved by full faculty affirmation at the Spring 2009 Graduate Faculty Meeting.