

Report on Research Compliance Volume 15, Number 6. June 30, 2018 In Wake of NAS Study, UCSF Offers View From The Trenches in Tackling Postdoc Challenges

By Theresa Defino

Earlier this spring, a storied committee under the National Academies of Sciences (NAS), Engineering, and Medicine issued “The Next Generation of Biomedical and Behavioral Sciences Researchers: Breaking Through.” Chaired by Ron Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins University, the committee proposed a host of recommendations not only for NIH, but for institutions and investigators, with the aim of strengthening “the nation’s biomedical research system” and ensuring “the successful launch of careers among the next generation of researchers.”

Among the suggestions are better mentoring of postdoctoral researchers, more equitable pay and the creation of a Biomedical Research Enterprise Council whose members would serve as a conduit for change (*RRC 5/18, p. 1*).

Many of the proposals resonated with Elizabeth Watkins, dean of the graduate division and vice chancellor of student academic affairs at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). Although not part of the committee, Watkins was invited to the press conference announcing the report to give feedback. In her remarks, Watkins said she hoped the efforts recommended by the committee would prove “actionable.”

And for UCSF, many of them already have. Watkins described UCSF’s experience in implementing some of the proposed reforms. She also pointed out where she felt the recommendations fell short.

Watkins said she terms early stage investigators, who are the focus of the report, “late stage trainees.” One key to improving their environment is for principal investigators (PIs) to “think beyond the immediate needs of their own labs,” she said. In addition, NIH “wields a big stick that can help move us toward the goal of improving the climate for postdocs at our universities,” Watkins said.

Hopkins and UCSF are among institutions that have already gotten a jump on addressing the issues. With Daniels, Watkins is co-chair of the Coalition for Next Generation Life Sciences, formed last year by nine research universities and an institution, which vowed to make public data on “education and training outcomes” that they say are lacking today.

Without this, students “are prevented from making informed choices about their pre- and postdoctoral training activities, and universities from preparing trainees for a full range of careers,” according to the coalition. Members did not issue a statement commenting on the report, Watkins told *RRC*.

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