Best Practice

Appointing and Paying Postdoctoral Associates and Fellows

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Preface

Best Practice documents are the product of informal discussions held with the FTC/BSC directors and help create efficiencies without compromising sound internal controls. The term "best practice" is used to describe the process of developing and following a standard way of doing things that multiple organizations can use. In addition, a "best" practice can evolve to become better as improvements are discovered. These documents represent generally accepted, informally standardized techniques, methods, or processes, which have proven themselves over time, to accomplish given tasks. Often based upon common sense, these practices are used where no specific formal methodology is in place or the existing methodology does not sufficiently address the issue. The idea behind them is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered more effectively with fewer problems and unforeseen complications.

Best Practices are used to maintain quality as an alternative to mandatory, legislated standards, and can be based on self-assessment or benchmarking.

They do not define any “required” procedures. Each unit needs to evaluate the document based on their customers’ needs, unit-level procedures, etc.
Objective

The question was raised of when is it appropriate to appoint and pay a postdoctoral appointee as a postdoctoral associate vs. a postdoctoral fellow. This document provides guidance on the limitations and appropriate use of the “fellow” title as well as information on making health insurance payments to these individuals.
Recommended Best Practice

Postdoctoral Associates

In general, and in most cases, individuals at the postdoctoral study level are appointed as postdoctoral associates. These individuals are paid through payroll and are considered employees of the university. Salary payments are subject to employee benefits charges and the individual is “benefits-eligible” based on Cornell’s standard guidelines.

Postdoctoral Fellows

There are only in two instances in which the sponsor requires the use of the “fellow” option, when a unit may appoint an individual as an unpaid postdoctoral fellow and pay the stipend through a KFS Disbursement Voucher (DV) using object code 9090:

1. For a training grant:
   a. The postdoc is supported on National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Research Service Award (NRSA) training grant.
   b. The postdoc is supported on an award that is substantially the same as NRSA grants.
   **Note:** NRSA requires the “fellowship” model on its training grants. Fellows are not employees and are not eligible for employer provided benefits.

2. For funding external to Cornell:
   a. The postdoc receives funding from foreign country and/or external company.
   b. The postdoc has applied personally for and received a fellowship award for support.
   **Note:** Generally, the individual is paid directly by the external party, although occasionally Cornell has entered an agreement to establish an External Organization (EO) account and process the payment on behalf of the external entity.

Health Insurance for Postdoctoral Associates

Principal investigators (PIs) in the contract colleges have the option, in certain circumstances, of appointing postdoctoral research associates to either contract college or endowed positions. Which position they choose determines which health insurance and other benefit terms are available to the employee. In either case, coverage for benefits-eligible positions is the same as any other regular, benefits-eligible employee in the unit.
Recommended Best Practice, continued

Health Insurance for Postdoctoral Fellows

Fellows appointed for at least six months at 50 percent may enroll in Cornell’s endowed health and dental benefits. Postdoctoral fellows are not pension-eligible.

The postdoctoral fellow is responsible for a portion of the costs, calculated as what an endowed employee normally pays for the coverage selected. The fellow will be billed quarterly for these costs.

The sponsor typically provides funding in the budget for the university portion of the health insurance costs, generally based on what Cornell (the employer) would pay for a postdoctoral associate. Endowed college awards are covered by the Endowed Benefits pool. Contract college units will be billed quarterly for these benefits by OHR records.