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How to Decide if a Post-doc is Right for You?

By: *Jevay Grooms*



Dr. Jevay Grooms



Dr. Salama Freed

Nearly ten years ago, when I began a doctoral program, the concept of a post-doctoral fellowship seemed like something “economists” did not traditionally do. Fellow graduate students in chemistry or engineering often mentioned their desires to get a postdoc after graduation, so I ignorantly associated it with the hard sciences. This didn’t seem like the path for me, but it planted the seed.

When I went on the market the first time, I applied to a couple of postdoc positions but chiefly academic and industry jobs. When presented with a few job prospects, one being a postdoc, my advisor talked over my options and what it could mean for my career long-term. It became clear that I stumbled into a great opportunity, an NIH postdoctoral fellowship under Dr. Anirban Basu. The mentoring, research environment, and time to fine-tune my skills has proven invaluable.

In a sense my postdoc fell into my lap, but this is far from the story Dr. Salama Freed shared with me. In speaking to her about her path, I was in awe of the thought and well-manicured career trajectory she developed for herself. While I wasn’t sure economists did postdocs, Dr. Freed is currently in her second post-doctoral fellowship position. She has had the unique perspective of precisely knowing what she hoped to achieve short-term and long-term with her Ph.D. in economics.

While Dr. Freed’s path to pursuing a doctorate in economics is unique and a story of its own, she and I spent time discussing her postdocs; how she decided to follow them; and how they have benefited her. Below are a few responses that may be of particular interest to those considering a postdoc.

Dr. Jevay Grooms: How did you find yourself pursuing not just one but two postdocs?

Dr. Salama Freed: I didn't anticipate pursuing two postdocs. When I entered the job market in 2018, I had a very specific path I defined for myself—I was headed to a tenure-track faculty position. I was excited about the prospect of financial security, but hesitant about being on my own in the research world. I didn't quite feel ready to sustain my own research agenda for two reasons: I felt my portfolio was a bit too nebulous and shallow, and I wasn't well versed in health policy. The former led me to my first postdoc at Penn LDI. I strengthened my research, econometric, and programming skills while I worked to hone the underlying theme of my research goals. The latter led me to my second postdoc at the National Pharmaceutical Council and Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy. In this role, I am applying within the Washington health policy world the skills I built in graduate school and my first postdoc.

Dr. Jevay Grooms: After spending five or more years in graduate school, some recent graduates can't imagine being a postdoc. How much did this weigh in your decision?

Dr. Salama Freed: A lot! I left a lucrative job in the tech sector and was anxious to return to that level of financial security. However, life as a postdoc isn't nearly as financially challenging as grad student life. I view (2-year) postdocs as intermediary steps between grad school and faculty. An academic postdoc is really the best of both worlds as you can build your research agenda without a tenure clock or teaching requirements.

Dr. Jevay Grooms: What advice would you give to graduate students considering a postdoctoral fellowship?

Dr. Salama Freed: Begin with the end in mind. I applied and interviewed for several postdoctoral positions and realized postdocs are not monolithic. Consider what you want to get out of the postdoc as you evaluate your options. Perhaps the goal is to strengthen your research portfolio outside the pressures of tenure and teaching, gain new econometric or programming skills, learn from and build relationships with the experts in your field of research, or build non-research skills vital to the advancement of your career.

If you are questioning whether the academic world is for you, consider applying for postdocs outside that space. If your research interest is research into a particular disease, type of healthcare system, risky health behavior, etc., maybe the goal is to find a way into the corporate or governmental side of health economics research. There are postdocs for that. Two that come to mind are the various fellowships offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Academy Health.

Dr. Jevay Grooms: Any misconceptions about being a postdoc you would like to comment on?

Dr. Salama Freed: A postdoc is not intended to be a break from developing your career. It's not a continuation of graduate school.

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