

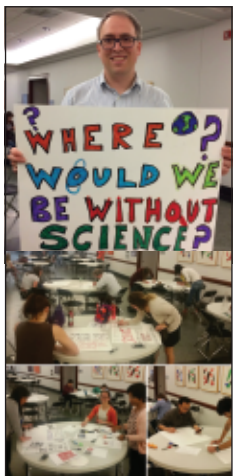
The Postdoc Press

University of Chicago
Biological Sciences Division
Postdoctoral Association

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The BSD PDA - Helping to serve, promote, and explore postdoc interests since 1999

Advocacy in Action: Science Policy Committee Update



The **March for Science** will take place on April 22nd in hundreds of cities worldwide, including Chicago. The March is an important event for scientists and science supporters to stand up for the role of science in our society, the value of knowledge, and the continued support for science. The Science Policy Committee hosted a sign-making event this week to help support the March for Science. Students, postdocs, faculty, and staff all came to express why science is important to them.

Upcoming event: On April 25th, at 10-11 am in GCIS-301 we will be hosting a seminar featuring Jo Handelsman Ph.D., the Director of the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery and the former Associate Director for Basic Science at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Dr. Handelsman will be discussing her experiences as a scientist in the policy realm.

If you are interested in learning more about the science policy committee please contact bsdsciencepolicy@gmail.com. Also check our [website](#) for information on upcoming events, science advocacy, policy fellowships, and more.

The Hard Problem: What divides biology and self?

By: Judy Prasad

In March the PDA hosted a joint seminar and social event where postdocs attended 'The Hard Problem', a play by playwright Tom Stoppard at the Court Theater. The play centers on a psychologist as she struggles with her research. She begins to question where biology ends and personhood begins, and if there is nothing but matter, "what is consciousness"? Judy Prasad, a postdoc in the Department of Neurobiology attended the event and discussion and offers her opinion on the concepts of the play.

I found the play to give a skewed perspective on the role of neurobiology and neuroscience, generally, in addressing the hard problem. I believe that understanding the functional contributions of each region in the brain (and pathways therein) is an important step prior to/in parallel with probing deeper and more challenging questions, such as "what is consciousness?". It therefore amused me that the protagonist had a certain disdain for neurobiologists, given we both have backgrounds in psychology (arguably the crucible for the field of neuroscience).

The protagonist is at odds in reconciling her scientific inquiry and spiritual beliefs in this play. She would not be an outlier in my community (which isn't comprised of Dawkins worshipping atheists in reality). Seeing her ostracized by her peers on stage made me uncomfortable, as this gives the impression that scientists do not accept those who have deep rooted spirituality. This generalization is stereotypical and misleading, and I do not believe it an appropriate reflection of who we actually are. Scientists are multifaceted and complex in their belief systems- we may be highly specialized human beings, but we are still human beings.



Postdocs attend "The Hard Problem" at the Court Theater for the March PDA social.

I was very pleased to be part of an engaging discussion after the play, in which I used the opportunity to ask the audience their perspective on techniques and the rate of progress in my field. They were generally positive and rightfully skeptical of the current state of neuroscientific research. I believe that more cross-talk between scientists and the public is necessary, to inform and educate laymen as well as justify the use of public funds for our research.

Bringing our Community Together: the National Postdoctoral Association Annual Conference

By: Kristy Hentchel



Chicago Postdoctoral Association (PDA) leadership and the Postdoctoral Office (PDO) attend the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) Conference.

This year's 15th annual **National Postdoctoral Association (NPA)** Annual Conference was hosted by the University of California System and held in San Francisco, California. This meeting enables the postdoctoral community - postdocs, administrators, and supporters to gather and discuss ways to enhance the postdoc experience.

University of Chicago Dean and Director of Postdoctoral Affairs, Nancy Schwartz, Postdoctoral Affairs Administrator Erin Heckler, and BSD PDA leadership Sean McConnell, Joe Pierre, and Kristy Hentchel, were all in attendance to participate.

Survey committee co-chairs Pierre and McConnell presented their preliminary data from the National Postdoctoral Survey at the poster session. Their data provides a much needed glimpse into the status of the postdoc community in the U.S., with over 7,600 respondents.

Taking on a larger role for postdoc advocacy at a national level, PDA Administrator Heckler is the newly elected co-chair of the NPA Resource Development Committee, responsible for developing and providing resources for the postdoc community.

UChicago's Kathleen Goss, Senior Science Writer and Director for Strategic Partnerships at the University of Chicago Medicine Comprehensive Cancer Center, was also at the NPA meeting and co-lead a session on 'Practical Tools for Navigating Your Career Path Evolution'.

National Postdoctoral Association Resources

- UChicago is an NPA sustaining member institution - meaning you can become an affiliate **NPA member** at no cost.
- New resources for postdocs include the new **career center** and a newly launched **webinar series**.
- Available online are issues of the **POSTDOCKET**, the NPA monthly newsletter.
- Learn about **policy issues** regarding postdocs and read the NPA's position statements.

Postdoc Spotlight: John Leonard

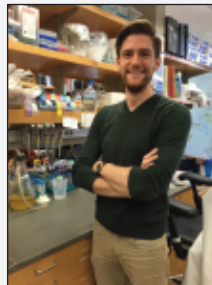
Lab: Erin Adams

Department: Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

What is your research focus? I study regulatory T cells (Tregs), which are specialized blood cells whose role is to actively suppress immune responses against things that aren't harmful, such as the body's own organs or commensal microbes. In healthy people, these cells are essential for preventing autoimmune disease, whereas, in cancer, Tregs are hijacked to protect tumors from being killed by the host immune system. My work focuses on the biochemical basis of how Tregs recognize "antigens" (peptide fragments presented on the surface of cells) derived from the host in order to direct their immunosuppressive activities.

What is your favorite part about being a scientist? The ability to dream up a question, design an experiment, and then test it. This process (when it works) is extremely gratifying.

Why is promoting the March for Science important to you? I think it's important to remind people how everyone's lives are touched by the product of science, regardless of their background or political affiliation. It's a vehicle for societal progress, a common goal that we can (and should) all unite behind. I also think that, because most people don't know a scientist personally, there's a lot of misunderstanding about who we are and what we do. Showing that we're a vibrant, passionate, diverse group of people is important - I think it humanizes the idea of science to the general public.



Postdoc fellow John Leonard in his lab. Leonard is in the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Department in the lab of Erin Adams and is also the President of the Biological Sciences Division Postdoctoral Association.



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