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Using postdoctoral scholar engagement as a key driver of institutional change

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Abstract

Postdoctoral scholars are essential to the research enterprise, yet they remain difficult to engage because they are decentralized, transient, and diverse in career goals and disciplinary contexts. This article examines how New York University Grossman School of Medicine rebuilt postdoctoral engagement after COVID-19 and argues that engagement can drive institutional change regardless of institution type, size, or available resources. Using a five-year strategic plan, the Postdoctoral Affairs office implemented an approach centered on visibility, trust-building, communication infrastructure, community, postdoc-led governance, and structural advocacy. Key initiatives included resources for incoming postdocs, centralized annual reviews, salary advocacy, redesigned newsletters, an elected Postdoctoral Association Council, and expanded recognition efforts. Indicators—including participation, newsletter readership, and organizational survey trends—suggest increased reach, improved connection to support structures, and more positive postdoctoral experiences over time. Although no single measure fully captures engagement, the NYU Grossman School of Medicine case study shows that sustained, multi-level strategies can strengthen trust, belonging, and participation. We conclude that postdoc engagement works best when institutions treat it as a coordinated priority that aligns community-building with structural support.

KEYWORDS
career development, scholar engagement, postdoc office, institutional change, community

Impact statement

Why is the work submitted important to the field? This work is important because it addresses a longstanding challenge in higher education and research administration: how to effectively engage postdoctoral scholars, a population that is central to the research enterprise yet often decentralized, transient, and institutionally overlooked. By focusing on engagement as an institutional priority rather than a peripheral activity, the article highlights a practical pathway for improving postdoc support, community, and career development. How does the work submitted advance the field? It advances the field by offering a detailed institutional case study of post-COVID postdoc re-engagement at NYU Grossman School of Medicine. The article moves beyond general recommendations by showing how a coordinated strategy—combining communication systems, recognition, governance, programming, and policy advocacy—can rebuild trust, belonging, and participation over time. What new

information does this work impart to the field? The article provides a post-pandemic framework for understanding postdoc engagement as multidimensional and dynamic rather than synonymous with event attendance alone. It also identifies practical indicators of engagement and describes how hybrid programming, elected postdoc leadership, and structural improvements can work together to support institutional change. How does this new information impact the field? This information gives institutions a more actionable and realistic model for strengthening postdoc engagement. It encourages postdoctoral offices and institutional leaders to use engagement not only as a support function, but as a lever for broader cultural and structural change.

Introduction

Postdoctoral scholars have been part of the U.S. research enterprise for over 150 years, traditionally as preparation for independent academic careers. As recently as the 1970s, postdoctoral fellowships were as competitive as tenure-track positions, and postdocs often held faculty offers before starting their fellowships [1].

This changed during the 1980s and 1990s, when rapid growth in academic biomedical research expanded PhD training exponentially [1]. The mid-1990s doubling of the NIH budget intensified the shift, attracting many internationally trained postdocs [1], while faculty positions did not keep pace [2]. Postdoctoral appointments lengthened into a holding pattern, as scholars needed time to build competitive CVs for desired positions. The ballooning postdoctoral population and growing emphasis on academic credentials were unintended consequences of national funding changes, rapid growth in PhD programs, and a lack of local central oversight.

Few institutions had formal administrative oversight of postdocs before 1990. Populations were small, positions temporary, and focus limited to research mentorship. In the late 1990s, graduate deans from the Association of American Medical Colleges' Group on Research, Education, and Training (AAMC GREAT) recognized this gap and formed the first postdoctoral offices (PDOs) [3], operating as extensions of graduate programs with limited budgets and staff. Postdocs also organized nationally: Science's Next Wave Postdoc Network held the first national meetings on postdoctoral issues from 2000 to 2002, and the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) was established in 2003, advocating for expanded offices, increased funding, and professional development across all career paths. PDOs have grown from fewer than 40 in 2003 to over 250 in 2026, even serving disciplines beyond biomedicine.

Despite this expansion, postdocs remain difficult to engage institutionally. They are highly decentralized, and their needs and career goals vary widely by discipline, making uniform engagement strategies less effective. Yet this challenge highlights why engagement matters: postdocs contribute substantially to research while occupying a career stage especially vulnerable to isolation. Institution-wide engagement must be built to ensure that postdocs know what resources exist, feel supported, and can access training opportunities.

This article examines post-COVID engagement strategies at New York University Grossman School of Medicine (NYU GSoM), showing how an institution adapted to a changed landscape that blended virtual convenience with the community-building value of in-person programming. The strategies described here come from a single institution, but many are scalable and can be adapted to offices of different sizes and budgets.

Defining and understanding engagement

Postdoctoral engagement is hard to define, and definitions vary by stakeholder and institution. Postdocs are transient and decentralized, and their daily experience is shaped more by their research group or department than by a central office. PDOs often cannot assess postdocs' engagement through local resources, and low participation in institutional programming does not necessarily indicate disengagement.

Most institutions track engagement through survey responses, event attendance, resource utilization, volunteering, sense of belonging, or awareness of support. These metrics are useful, but engagement is better understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing these factors to assess whether postdocs are reached by central communication, feel connected to a broader postdoc community, and are likely to seek support outside their lab when needed. Engagement is not simply participation, but the extent to which postdocs are aware of and use the structures meant to support their training and careers.

COVID-19 complicated both engagement and its measurement. Post-pandemic engagement must be understood as dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by institutional outreach and postdocs' evolving needs, expectations, and priorities.

Case study: re-engaging postdocs at NYU Grossman School of Medicine after COVID-19

Before COVID-19, NYU GSoM had a robust, highly visible engagement model built on frequent in-person programming and repeated community contact. NYU GSoM was one of 17 awardees of the NIH Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training (BEST) grant, a 2013-2014 NIH Common Fund initiative to create sustainable approaches to graduate and postdoctoral career development training. In 2017–2018, the final year of funding, there were 45 events, including courses, workshops, talks, and site visits; only two were virtual. Weekly coffee hours and bimonthly orientations offered regular connection with the office and the broader community.

Rebuilding this culture of engagement at NYU GSoM required more than restarting old activities. Before COVID-19, virtual programming was limited and often underused: many offerings were asynchronous, perceived as inferior to in-person formats, and

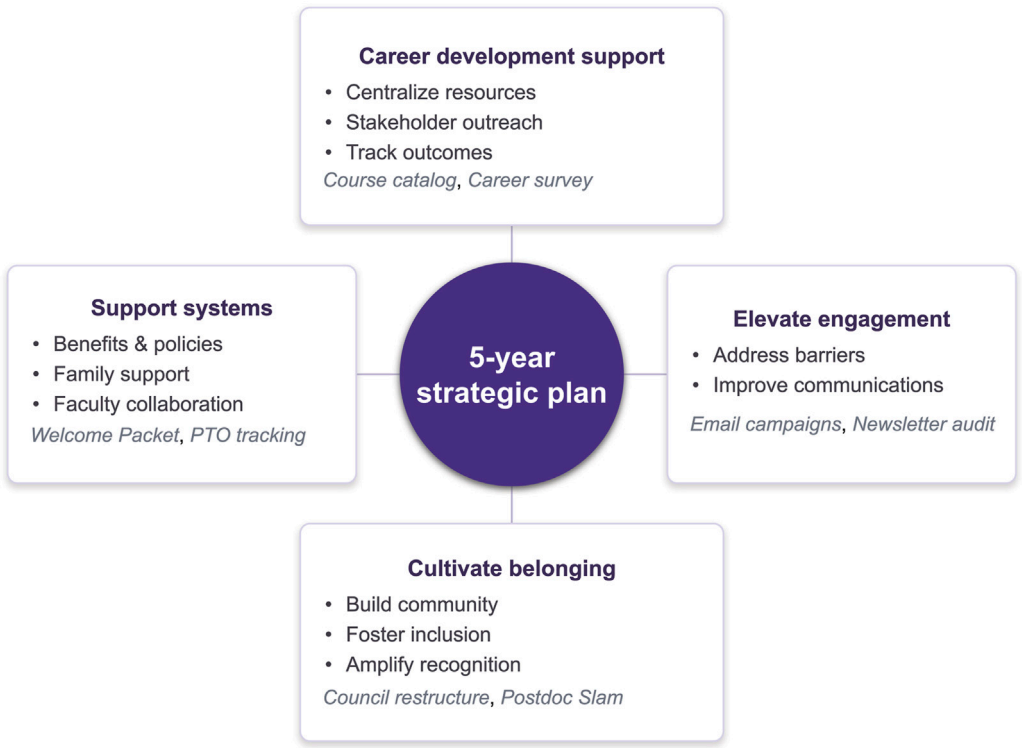


FIGURE 1
NYU GSoM Postdoctoral Affairs five-year strategic plan. Developed in response to post-COVID-19 shifts in postdoc engagement, the plan comprises four pillars: career development support, elevating engagement, cultivating belonging, and support systems.

offered little community-building. The pandemic forced a rapid shift from nearly all in-person programming to fully virtual engagement, which became essential for maintaining connection during prolonged isolation. Postdocs readily resumed in-person social events but hesitated to attend in-person career development events, reflecting broader shifts in how trainees related to community, institutional leadership, and career purpose.

Postdoctoral Affairs, currently a five-person team within the Office of Science and Research (OSR) at NYU GSoM, was established in 1994 to support and strengthen the postdoctoral training experience. In response to these cultural shifts, it developed a five-year strategic plan [4] (Figure 1) as a living framework for rebuilding engagement and directing institutional change. Actively engaged postdocs were recruited to identify pain points, define goals, and establish success metrics, and their input informed priorities that were refined through ongoing feedback. Four years into implementation, the framework has focused office priorities, improved communication, broadened collaborations, and raised team morale. It has also contributed to a restored sense of community and belonging, increased participation in career development, greater postdoc visibility and recognition, and a more supportive environment. This supportive environment, in which every postdoc has the resources and opportunities to build an independent career, is our key endpoint; engagement is essential to reaching it, but engagement for its own sake would be of limited value to postdocs.

Increasing postdoc trust and visibility

Re-engagement required restoring postdocs' sense of being valued and supported. As a transient population often unrecognized as full employees, postdocs easily feel overlooked despite essential contributions. Post-COVID feedback suggested growing skepticism toward institutional leadership and diminished confidence that postdoc concerns were acknowledged.

Visibility efforts thus became integral to rebuilding trust. Postdocs noted that digital signage throughout the medical center highlighted faculty and leadership but rarely postdocs, so the PDO partnered with OSR's Communications team to feature postdoc research and accomplishments on these displays. In 2022, National Postdoc Appreciation Week was expanded into "Postdoc Appreciation Month," with events typically unavailable to postdocs: a formal dinner cruise, a mental health-focused coffee hour with therapy dogs, and "Postdoc Slam," a three-minute research presentation competition. These efforts have resulted in significant institutional change, with broad recognition of postdoc achievements in institutional research communications, wider participation in mental health events, and faculty and senior leadership attendance at Postdoc Slam.

Postdoctoral Affairs also strengthened support for incoming postdocs through a comprehensive Welcome Packet developed alongside current and former postdoctoral fellows. Included with offer letters, it covers policies, taxes, benefits, and practical aspects of

living in New York City. Collaboration with the Housing Services Office streamlined applications by creating a digital application form, reducing administrative burden. These changes signaled recognition of postdocs' specific needs and established an institutional connection before the postdoc appointment started.

Trust was also reinforced through material improvements. The institutional minimum salary, previously tied only to NIH NRSA levels without regard for New York City's cost of living, increased significantly from 2021 to 2024 and has aligned with regular annual increases since then. A centralized annual performance review, established in 2022, created consistent progress documentation and standardized career development discussions between postdocs and mentors. Together, these changes demonstrated in tangible ways that postdocs are valued members of the institution.

Working with the PDA council and centering postdoc voices

A central strategy has been embedding postdoc voices in both the planning and implementation of changes. A significant change was forming an elected, self-governed Postdoctoral Association (PDA) Council, a substantial evolution from the previous appointed model. This broadened representation, increased legitimacy, and created a durable framework for postdoc leadership.

The new PDA Council navigated unfamiliar governance structures while managing some members' residual institutional distrust. However, support, guidance, and funding from Postdoctoral Affairs proved essential for enabling postdoc leaders to contribute meaningfully within the constraints of temporary, demanding appointments. Over time, the Council became an effective outreach partner, implementing community-driven initiatives such as cultural heritage celebrations, a fund for postdoc-proposed initiatives, and a postdoc parents networking group. Regular meetings between Postdoctoral Affairs and the Council established sustained two-way communication, providing feedback that informs the office's strategic priorities.

Finally, Postdoctoral Affairs hosts an annual in-person "Year-in-Review" luncheon for all postdocs, presenting progress on the five-year plan and inviting discussion. These well-attended events (typically 75–100) demonstrate to postdocs that their perspectives inform meaningful improvements and help postdocs understand how institutional change occurs and why their engagement matters.

Building communication infrastructure

Reaching postdocs effectively requires intentional communication, particularly at large, decentralized institutions. During the pandemic, disappearing in-person interactions left postdocs increasingly isolated. An early response was a postdoc Slack workspace that provided real-time announcements and shared community space, reducing isolation.

Communication strategies expanded as re-engagement progressed. Partnerships with departmental administrators distributed information across decentralized research units. The weekly email newsletter was redesigned with a personal editor's letter, a kudos section celebrating accomplishments, event photos, and postdoc spotlight interviews. A new dynamic website featuring event announcements, resources, job postings, and workshop catalogs improved visibility, and a newsletter link to virtual office hours offered a low-barrier path to direct support. Event promotion was continually refined through featured newsletter placement, repeated reminders, Slack announcements, website postings, departmental dissemination, and announcements at other events.

Diversifying engagement channels built infrastructure that not only disseminated information but made opportunities more accessible. It also made postdoc response patterns more visible, revealing which outreach approaches and event types gained traction, and laying the groundwork for reviewing participation indicators and programming adjustments. This illustrates how engagement can yield improved resources (Slack, newsletter, website) that create a positive feedback loop, increasing engagement with each cycle. Each channel serves a different purpose, and postdoc preferences differ, so redundancy was deliberate rather than wasteful.

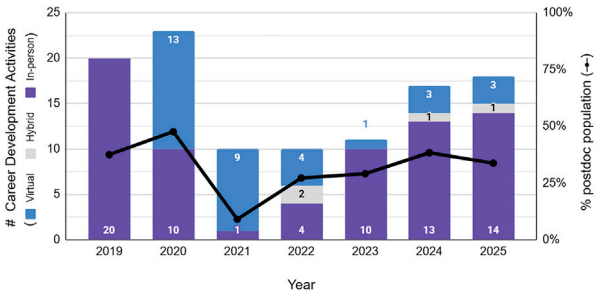


FIGURE 2
Postdoc career development activities and attendance, 2019–2025. Bars show the number of in-person, hybrid, and virtual activities offered (left y-axis); the line shows the percentage of postdocs attending at least one event (right y-axis).

Engagement indicators and program adaptation

Programming adaptations were informed by postdocs' attendance patterns at PDO-hosted events. Postdocs continued to attend in-person social events, but a 2022 climate survey on career and professional development interests confirmed that they were less willing than before the pandemic to spend weekends on formal career programming. In response, the office adjusted event timing and, beginning in 2022, gradually returned career development programming to an in-person format to help rebuild the postdoc community. Today, the office offers mostly in-person programming with few virtual-only options; its hybrid programs combine scheduled in-person and virtual sessions rather than allowing participants to attend either way. Participation in these events had been relatively strong before and early in the pandemic: 38% of all postdocs attended at least one PDO-hosted career development event in 2019, and 48% in 2020. Participation then dropped sharply in 2021, when only 9% attended at least one, before climbing to 27% in 2022 and continuing to rise since (Figure 2). These patterns do not show that restructuring alone caused the

change, but they are consistent with programming becoming better aligned with post-pandemic preferences, and with postdocs once again prioritizing PDO-hosted professional development.

Because engagement cannot be captured by any single measure, Postdoctoral Affairs monitored several practical indicators of reach and participation, including event registration, newsletter readership, and career development participation. These served not as definitive measures but as partial signals of whether postdocs were reconnecting with institutional programming and support. In 2024, 69% of postdocs registered for at least one event, 79% opened at least half of the weekly newsletters, and 94% engaged with at least one major communication or programming channel. These findings do not show that any single strategy caused increased engagement, but they are better understood as encouraging signs that postdocs were being reached through multiple channels.

Office-level indicators of reach and participation were also broadly aligned with institution-wide engagement and pulse survey trends. From 2021 to 2025, organizational survey results suggested increasingly positive engagement (e.g., trust, belonging, recognition, support, growth) among postdocs. These findings cannot be attributed to any single intervention; they likely reflect the combined influence of Postdoctoral Affairs, broader institutional efforts, and departmental, laboratory, and supervisory environments. They nonetheless support the interpretation that postdocs' overall institutional experience became more positive.

Taken together, these findings highlight both the value and limits of engagement metrics. No single measure fully captures whether postdocs feel connected, supported, or prepared to seek help; a combination of communication, registration, participation, and survey indicators gives a more useful picture of changing patterns. Offices should interpret any one number cautiously and read trends over several years.

Persistent challenges

Despite substantial progress, challenges remain. The postdoctoral population is inherently transient, with about 500 postdocs at any time and continuous turnover, so outreach and community-building require ongoing renewal. NYU GSoM's high decentralization, with postdocs spread across numerous units, departments, and locations, makes some groups, especially clinical postdocs and those far from central campus, harder to reach.

Survey-based assessment is also difficult. The institution already administers an engagement survey every other year and a shorter pulse survey in alternate years, so additional postdoc-specific surveys compete for attention and add to survey fatigue. Locally administered surveys also tend to have lower response rates than institution-wide ones, limiting confidence that results represent the broader population.

Volunteer-led leadership varies. Since appointments are temporary and research-demanding, PDA Council capacity fluctuates with its members. The office learned to keep expectations realistic while providing support, reinforcing a complementary model: the office provides administrative infrastructure and institutional knowledge, while the Council contributes peer legitimacy and direct postdoc insight.

Finally, faculty and departmental culture shape engagement beyond central oversight. Departmental administrator partnerships improved communication, but faculty support remains crucial to whether postdocs participate in professional development. Strengthening departmental support cultures is a continuing effort.

Lessons learned

First, rebuilding trust and community seemed essential for improving engagement. Efforts to increase visibility, recognition, and responsiveness accompanied less skepticism and a stronger sense of belonging as in-person programming resumed. Relatively low-cost interventions, such as personalized communication, office hours, and welcome packets, had a substantial impact by showing that Postdoctoral Affairs attended to postdoc well-being. These gestures were inexpensive relative to their effect, which suggests that smaller offices with limited budgets can still make meaningful progress.

Second, communication should be a core engagement strategy, not a separate administrative task. Reaching a large, decentralized population is difficult, especially when communication channels become cluttered or irrelevant. Email listservs get ignored when messages feel unhelpful, and platforms such as Slack loses effectiveness when its purpose is poorly defined. Communication channels need routine refreshing, active coordination, clear expectations for use, and consistent branding.

Third, changes requiring substantial initial effort become easier to maintain once established. The elected PDA Council, annual review process, and communication systems demanded significant early investment but have matured, providing sustained value and efficiency. Building strategic systems may slow initial progress but greatly expand future options.

Finally, structural advocacy matters. Trust and engagement grew not only through communication and programming but through policy addressing material training conditions. Salary increases, inflation adjustments, and centralized review signaled concrete support and conveyed that postdoc concerns are legitimate institutional priorities.

Together, these lessons suggest that engagement works best as a coordinated institutional strategy aligning communication, community-building, programming, and structural support to build trust and responsiveness over time (Figure 3).

Advice for local implementation

Postdocs need community and support to thrive scientifically and personally, yet institutions often lack the infrastructure to support their engagement. Engagement means belonging to communities that genuinely care about postdoc well-being, communities that departments, councils, and administrators can cultivate. The recommendations below are organized around visibility, communication, partnership with postdoc leaders, and programming, and are scaled so that smaller offices can adopt them in stages.

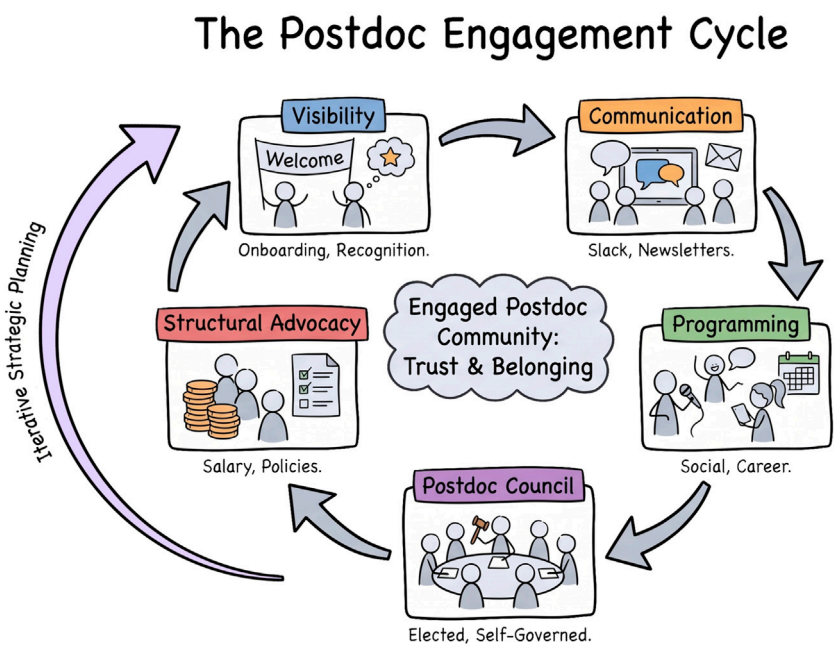


FIGURE 3
The Postdoc Engagement Cycle. Visibility, communication, programming, an elected postdoc council, and structural advocacy form a continuous cycle that builds trust, responsiveness, and engagement.

Visibility and support awareness

From day one, postdocs should know that dedicated people support their wellbeing. Send every incoming postdoc a welcome package including a personalized letter with staff photos, institutional handbooks, local guides on housing, transit, childcare, and cultural life, and information on community programming and professional development. Include clear, visible contact information so postdocs know exactly whom to approach with questions, whether about logistics, benefits, or career development, from their very first week.

Hold regular, recurring orientations that accommodate continuous new arrivals. Each session can include staff and postdoc introductions, a detailed overview of available support, and time for newcomers to ask questions and meet one another. Repeating orientations on a predictable schedule, such as every other month, lets new arrivals plan around them. Smaller offices might use lunch-and-learns or informal meet-and-greets as scalable alternatives. However it is done, postdocs should always know which team supports them.

Effective communication

Low-friction, informal communication tools matter. Institutional email is necessary but feels formal and is easily ignored; multiple low-barrier channels together reduce isolation and keep postdocs informed.

Offer a dedicated platform such as a Slack workspace, organized by topic channels like *postdoc_parents, meet-up, housing*, and *from_postdoc_affairs*. Getting started is simple with a free plan, a platform already familiar to PDO staff, or an enterprise-wide license.

Weekly newsletters reduce clutter from separate promotional emails. They can compile upcoming internal and external events, funding opportunities, news, and job postings, with a prominent link to virtual office hours or wellness resources. Readability can be improved through personal messages, event photos, postdoc spotlights, polls, and "Postdoc Accomplishments" sections celebrating publications, grants, and milestones. If assembling a newsletter is too time-consuming, simple event digests or website job boards can fill gaps, particularly external opportunities postdocs might not otherwise notice.

Complement newsletters with a dynamic website offering a stable, central source of information, including upcoming events, a course catalog, PDA Council pages, and curated resources. For a decentralized population, a well-maintained site improves accessibility, supports self-service, and increases the visibility of support.

PDA council as partners

PDA councils are valuable partners, representing postdoc perspectives and co-developing community initiatives. Establishing a fully elected, self-governed council, however, requires substantial upfront time and effort. Smaller or resource-constrained offices may find it more feasible to recruit a handful of trusted postdocs to disseminate information and co-facilitate events. As these informal leadership structures strengthen, broader interest may follow and evolve into formal self-governed councils that continue PDO partnerships. Long-term investment in postdoc leadership, formal or informal, multiplies engagement and institutional trust.

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TABLE 1 Postdoc engagement initiatives by category, with key purpose, outcomes, and implementation involvement. Involvement reflects the perceived effort and/or cost of each strategy.

Initiative category	Specific strategy or activity	Key purpose	Outcomes	Implementation involvement
Communication & Transparency	Slack Workspace	Reduce isolation and provide real-time announcements and shared community space	Provided a real-time communication channel and supported postdoc-generated community interaction	Low; utilizing free or low-cost plans to create real-time communication channels
	Annual 'Year-in-Review' Luncheon	Transparency; demonstrate that postdoc perspectives inform institutional change	Helps postdocs understand institutional change, fosters engagement	Low; open discussion and presentation of institutional progress.
	Weekly Newsletter	Centralized outreach on career development, social events, important news, and accomplishments	79% of postdocs opened and read at least half of newsletters in 2024	Moderate; requires building and routinely updating content across events, resources, and postings
	Resource Hub Website	Improve visibility of events, resources, and opportunities in one accessible place	Created a stable, centralized source of information for postdocs and mentors	Moderate; requires building and routinely updating content across events, resources, and postings
Community-Building & Recognition	Welcome Packet	Strengthen support for incoming postdocs and establish institutional connection before arrival	Included in the offer letter which ensures every postdoc receives it	Moderate; initial investment in content creation with easier maintenance
	Digital Signage Displays	Increase postdoc visibility and recognition within the medical center	Increased visibility and recognition of postdocs' contribution at the medical center	Moderate; requires partnership with communications to highlight postdoc work on medical center displays
	PDA Community-Driven Initiatives	Foster community and belonging through postdoc-led, community-responsive programming	Strengthened community and belonging; sustained two-way communication with the office	Moderate; postdoc-led programming supported by office funding and guidance
	Extended National Postdoc Appreciation Week	Restore postdocs' sense of being valued and supported; celebrate contributions	High engagement period with postdocs; greater visibility and recognition of postdocs' contribution at the medical center with internal comms coverage	High; involves organizing multiple signature events over a month-long period
Professional Development Programming	Restructured Career Development	Align career development programming with postdocs' post-pandemic preferences for timing and format	Participation in career development programming fluctuated over time, suggesting continued adaptation in postdoc participation rather than a simple upward trend	Moderate; required survey-based reassessment, scheduling changes, and continued adaptation of program format
	One-on-One Virtual Office Hours	Provide a low-barrier pathway for direct support and relationship building	Established an online system (Calendly) for automatic reservations	Low; provides low-barrier pathways for direct support and relationship building
Structural & Policy Support	Salary Increases	Address cost of living in NYC and demonstrate that postdocs are valued	Tangible demonstration of value; reinforced trust.	High; requires significant administrative and budgetary advocacy and policy change
	Centralized Annual Performance Review	Create consistent progress documentation and standardized career development discussions	Created consistent documentation of progress and standardized career development discussions between postdocs and mentors	High; requires institutional policy change and standardization of career development discussions
	Elected PDA Council	Embed postdoc voices in planning; provide independent governance and peer legitimacy	Broadened representation; created durable framework for leadership; implemented community-driven initiatives	High; requires establishing governance structures and funding for postdoc leaders

When transitioning to a formal council, begin with a transitional group of trusted, active postdocs interested in a more representative structure. Framing the transition as a response to postdoc interest in democratic governance builds legitimacy. The group can draft bylaws and a constitution, design elections, and explain the council's purpose to the broader community. In the first year, transition leaders may serve alongside newly elected members to guide the new structure through its first cycle. Afterward, elected members can serve staggered terms, such as two-year appointments with annual elections, allowing experienced members to provide guidance to newly elected ones.

Council service is also leadership development, building experience in governance, budgeting, program planning, advocacy, and peer communication. Yet effectiveness fluctuates with members' capacity and reliability, so the PDO must often strike a careful balance between allowing postdoc leadership autonomy and providing enough guidance to support continuity. One helpful practice is designating a non-voting PDO staff representative to attend meetings, offering support and institutional knowledge without displacing postdoc leadership. Established procedures such as Robert's Rules of Order reduce conflict, clarify expectations, and maintain momentum.

Building community through programming

Build engagement through a thoughtful mix of homegrown social and professional development programming. Community-building works best when it includes not only large celebratory events, but also recurring small-scale opportunities for personal connection, such as weekly coffee hours. Social programming can mark major holidays, take advantage of warm weather for outdoor activities, and treat Postdoc Appreciation Week as a signature annual event. Predictable annual traditions give postdocs something to anticipate and help communities form across departments. A broader range of formats, including cultural events, sports or recreation, family-friendly gatherings, and hobby-based clubs, can reach postdocs less interested in traditional mixers.

Programming is strongest when postdocs help shape it, so a PDA Council or similar body is a valuable collaborator. Crowdsourcing ideas and offering small-scale support for postdoc-led initiatives, such as a community fund, can surface needs and interests that a central office might miss and strengthen postdoc ownership. Institutions can further support belonging by encouraging resource groups or affinity networks, such as parent networks or disability-focused groups, which create spaces for more targeted connection and support.

Professional development should contribute to community-building rather than exist apart from it. Programming can reach beyond tenure-track preparation with workshops on medical communications, science policy and advocacy, science communication, grant and manuscript preparation, or networking. Advertising upcoming events during current programming keeps offerings visible. Keep events free when possible to reduce barriers, though nominal fees may improve follow-through for high-demand activities. Faculty, alumni, or volunteer professionals can supplement limited budgets, and institutions should share external opportunities from nearby organizations or virtual programs when local capacity is limited. A thoughtful mix of social and professional events, even modestly scaled, creates cultures where postdocs feel invested and valued (Table 1).

Conclusion and next steps

NYU GSoM's experience shows that intentional, coordinated efforts to rebuild postdoc engagement are both necessary and achievable in the post-pandemic landscape. By prioritizing visibility, trust, communication, and structural support alongside community-building programming, institutions can create environments where postdocs feel valued as essential members of the research community. Several concrete steps can sustain and expand these efforts.

First, conduct a comprehensive audit of current postdoc support infrastructure to identify gaps in visibility, communication, and career development offerings. Second, engage postdocs directly through surveys, focus groups, or council formation to understand local needs and preferences, which may differ from assumptions. Third, develop or refresh strategic plans with postdoc input, setting measurable engagement benchmarks and clear accountability for implementation across departments and offices. Fourth, invest in communication infrastructure, whether Slack, redesigned newsletters, enhanced websites, or social media, that meets postdocs where they are. Fifth, advocate persistently for material improvements, recognizing that trust is built through both symbolic recognition and concrete policy changes in compensation, benefits, and career development resources.

Ongoing assessment of what works in each context remains essential. These steps are not a checklist to complete once, but a cycle of listening, acting, and reassessing that institutions of any size can begin with modest resources. The postdoctoral period will keep evolving with demographic shifts, funding trends, and career path diversification, so support structures must remain flexible, responsive, and informed by postdoc voices rather than assumptions. By treating engagement as a strategic institutional priority rather than an ancillary responsibility, institutions can strengthen their research enterprise while ensuring that the scholars driving discovery receive the support, recognition, and community they deserve.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Data availability

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. AI Tool Name: NotebookLM Assistant Developer: Google Model: Gemini 1.5 Pro Source Material: "Engagement article working draft 6-25-26" Usage Profile: This AI tool was utilized to analyze the provided manuscript to assist in the following areas: Visual Framework: Designing the conceptual "Postdoc Engagement Cycle" figure and the "NYU Grossman School of Medicine Postdoc Engagement Initiatives" implementation tables Strategic Distillation: Condensing detailed institutional strategies into concise keywords for visual presentation. Declaration Text: "This article was developed with the assistance of NotebookLM (powered by Google's Gemini 1.5 Pro). The AI was used to analyze the source text, 'Engagement article working draft 6-25-26,' to assist with designing the conceptual infographics and data tables presented in this work. All AI-generated suggestions and artifacts were reviewed, edited, and validated by the author to ensure accuracy and alignment with institutional practices. Claude Fable 5 was used to copy edit and to ensure article length was within editorial limits. All AI edits were reviewed by the authors and multiple further rounds of editing occurred after use of Claude. NYUGSoM AI Ultraviolet was used for copy editing on some sections and all edits were reviewed and validated by the authors.

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