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By Jef Akst

Life Sciences Salary Survey 2009

To keep salaries static despite the depressed economy, institutions are cutting jobs, forcing furloughs, and making changes to infrastructure.

Salaries in the scientific community aren't dipping with the economy, as might be expected from the massive budget cuts and subsequent layoffs being observed around the country. In fact, in *The Scientist* 's 2009 salary survey, we're seeing a 5% increase in total compensation over salaries last year—an increase that exceeds the 2008 inflation rate of 3.8%.

However, any decreases in academic salaries aren't likely to show up until next year's survey, says John Curtis, director of Research and Public Policy at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). "Most of [the '08-'09] salaries had been decided the previous summer or spring, almost a year before the full extent of the economic downturn was really known."

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In industry, “we have seen some pressure to reduce salaries, to reduce overall costs to the scientific industry,” says Rich Pennock, vice president of Kelly Scientific Resources, a recruiting company for the life sciences, “but mainly the salaries have been flat due to the fact that highly skilled talent is still in demand.” Industry’s solution to the economic situation, he says, has been to cut nonessential jobs rather than risk losing top talent by reducing salaries.

Academia has taken a different route: involuntary furloughs, or forced unpaid leave. This avoids actual salary reductions on paper, but at the end of the year, “people don’t get the same amount of money,” says Curtis. The University of Maryland, for example, enacted a furlough with a sliding scale, with higher-paid employees forced to take more time off. Other institutions, such as those in the University System of Georgia, avoided enacting any furloughs this past fiscal year, but did rewrite faculty contracts to allow such actions to take place in the future, if necessary. “Given the severity of the recession and the economic situation,” says Georgia Board of Regents spokesperson John Millsaps, “furloughs may become necessary, and now we have a mechanism in place.”

While I'd be hesitant to say we're in recovery, some trends of the past month or two indicate that things are loosening up. —Rich Pennock

“One of the real complications for faculty members is that they’re being told, ‘Don’t do any academic work on those days,’” Curtis says. But for many, “It’s almost like saying, ‘Don’t think.’” This is especially problematic for scientists whose ongoing laboratory experiments can’t be ignored just because the paycheck is taking a break. For some researchers at Clemson University in South Carolina, their 5-day forced leave simply translates into a pay cut, rather than a 5-day vacation. Scientists could “opt to take 15 minutes a day,” says Clemson spokesperson Sandy Woodward, rather than the whole chunk, and “were encouraged to schedule their furlough times outside of class time to minimize effects on students.”

In contrast to the pharmaceutical industry’s policies, departments across academia, including science, are opting to fill cheaper positions. There are more “people being hired into more contingent positions for a year or two years that are entirely dependent on some kind of grant money,” such as nontenure-track research fellows and postdoctoral fellows, Curtis says, referring to the results of a 1975–2007 AAUP survey. According to *The Scientist* ’s salary survey, nontenure-track academics make an average of almost $12,000 less than tenure-track professors and nearly $68,000 less than tenured professors. “[We] may very well [see] a continuation of that trend, if not an acceleration,” says Curtis.

In hopes of riding out the bad economic times, more young scientists are seeking higher education rather than jumping right into the job market. According to David Lapinski, assistant director of the career center at Duke University, 66% of biology majors are postponing the job search by going to graduate school, up from 60% in 2008. This trend is not unique to the sciences, Lapinski notes. Enrollment in law school is also on the rise.

The economic trends may be changing, however. “[While] I’d be hesitant to say we’re in recovery,” says

Pennock, some trends of the past month or two indicate “that things are loosening up.” Specifically, Kelly Scientific has recently been receiving more requests for scientists from biotech and pharma companies. “And if there’s a particular area of science that is starting to expand quickly, you’ll typically see those salaries increase slightly above the cost of living.”

“There’s an unmet medical need that remains,” so biomedical scientists continue to be in demand, says Toby Freedman, founder of Synapsis Search, a biotechnology recruiting company based in California. Biofuels are another popular area of research right now. “Life sciences is going to rebound better than other industries,” she says.

Spotted Salary Trends

Gender

At $75,000, median total compensation for women lags behind the $100,000 earned by men. However, women faculty members are also less likely to be employed full time or on the tenure track than men are, Curtis says. As these positions tend to pay more, this discrepancy in salary may be due, in part, to an underrepresentation of women at the full-professor rank. That being said, he confirms that women are often “paid less than men at the same faculty rank.”

Race

Life sciences is going to rebound better than other industries. —Toby Freedman

Among all ethnic groups surveyed, Asian MDs ($120,000) and PhDs ($72,000) brought in the lowest salaries among other MDs and PhDs, falling $63,000 and $25,000 behind white MD and PhD salaries, respectively. However, Asian scientists holding an MS earned the highest salaries ($76,000), averaging $12,000 more than white scientists with MS degrees—the next highest earning group.

Similar to the gender data, African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians tended to have more part-time positions relative to full-time positions when compared to whites, according to a 2005 AAUP survey, again suggesting the salary discrepancy could result from a discrepancy in the rate of high-paying jobs among minorities.

Region

“The coasts have higher salary ranges than the middle of the country for the sciences,” Pennock says. He suspects this is a result of the higher demands for scientists there. Indeed, the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC, brought in the highest median total compensation at $110,000, followed closely by San Francisco at $106,000. The two lowest salaries on this year’s map are Charlottesville, Va., at $62,000 and Madison, Wis., at $63,000.

Job Activity

“In the clinical trials area, we still see a very high demand for talent and the salaries are still increasing with the cost of living,” Pennock says. Indeed, the greatest percent increase in salary over 2005’s survey went to those who work in patents, licensing, and trademarks (62.4%), followed closely by clinical research (57.3%). Salaries in both of these areas increased at approximately twice the rate of the salary for a laboratory researcher (30%).

“Discovery research [has been] particularly hard hit,” Freedman agrees. “Companies are focused more on their

clinical trials because they're closer to sales," she says. The next greatest salary increases are seen in other areas that support clinical trials, such as safety and regulatory affairs, at 49.3% and 42.7% for government or nongovernment appointments, respectively.

Specialty

In this year's survey, the highest salaries went to tenured endocrinologists, at $160,000, with tenured biophysics professors earning the second highest median salary at $152,000. Biophysicists may be in high demand due to the recent push for the development of biofuels. That area is "hot right now," says Freedman.

Coming in at a close third are immunologists, among whom tenured professors earn a median salary of $144,000. This may be a result of a spike in the need for virologists due to the recent avian and swine flu scares, Pennock says, and a spike in demand is usually followed by a spike in salary.

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