Salary and Benefits as an Early Career Scientist at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

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In this document, we will provide guidance to the salaries and benefits that apply to early career scientists at NASA GSFC, explaining what to expect, and how to potentially bring up the topic with your (future) supervisor. It is written from the perspective of contractors/co-op scientists at GSFC, but some aspects may apply to new civil servants as well. Unlike the NASA Postdoctoral Program (NPP), which will be used as a point of comparison throughout this document, if you start as a contractor with one of the sponsoring organizations, there are little to no guidelines on what salary and benefits you may expect. Unless you specifically inquire about the conditions, you will likely not find out until you receive your contract, as there is typically not much more to be found than '*Salary and benefits are competitive'*. We hope the information in this document helps incoming contractor/co-op scientists to consider negotiating their starting salary and benefits, in addition to negotiating increases in salary and benefits every few years if they stay with an employer longer.

As a contractor/co-op scientist at GSFC, in most cases you will be effectively earning your salary through grant applications, or by working on your supervisor's grant money (particularly as you start). This is what is called a 'soft-money scientist'. Depending on the stage of your career, your independence, and your relationship with your supervisor/team, this means you have a responsibility to obtain your own funding and shape the direction of your work. To some degree, one may be able to choose to pursue different project or research topics depending on how successful funding proposals are. The fact that your job is often reliant on competitive funding is a source of stress and uncertainty, and the degree of this depends largely on your personal situation. One person might be very happy to work for less if this means the opportunity to do their dream job of working on space missions, and thus be willing to accept less job security, whereas another person might have financial responsibilities that require more stability and compensation. These are all personal choices, but knowledge is key here, and working anywhere should always be an informed decision.

The stipend of a starting NPP at GSFC is $80,000 (as of July 1, 2022) for fellows directly out of graduate school (more experienced fellows should receive higher salaries as a senior NPP). NPP stipends also vary by location so someone at a different NASA center may be making more or less then this amount. On top of that, NPPs stipends increase on a yearly base, typically by around $1500. In cases where your hiring civil servant plays a role in determining your salary, they may take the NPP stipend as a starting point, or the host institution may have a method to determine your compensation. However, for co-op scientists, the metrics determining your offer salary may not be transparent or shared with you, and the process behind which host institution provides your offer may similarly not be transparent.

NPPs do not pay FICA taxes (typically around 7.5% of your salary), but FICA taxes *are* withheld from your salary as a contractor/co-op scientist. For this reason, years spent on a NPP stipend do not count towards Social Security retirement benefits. Additionally, a NPP's health insurance is considered taxable income which is not typical with other positions. Be sure to include these into your calculations when comparing your salary with that of an NPP. Many factors go into what your salary may be, and no single answer exists. The best way to prepare for a conversation about this is to be informed about what you can expect. Look at what the current rates are for NPPs, and what a civil servant with your experience level (typically GS12/13) may make. Further, if your co-op host institution is a public university, salaries are reported publicly on the internet and can be checked for reference as well. In addition, one could look at the American Institute of Physics' salary calculator

as a helpful tool when negotiating your salary to see a range of salaries based on your experience and location (https://www.aip.org/statistics/salary-calculator). Please note this calculator shows the average pay for women is less than men, and we encourage you to advocate for the higher average salary regardless of gender. You can also use other online salary comparison tools for reference (e.g., Glassdoor).

In terms of negotiations, it is your experience level that gives you an opening to a higher pay scale. Consider things like your specific experiences (you may need less training than other candidates), responsibilities, teaching experience, proposal writing history (especially the amount of money awarded in grants as PI, Science-PI, or Co-I), scientific output and visibility (e.g., papers, presentations, relevant committee work), panel/review work, outreach and science communication, and awards. Provide whoever is presenting your offer with specific information and numbers about the above credentials that justify a higher title or salary. Even small increases add up, because it is likely that the starting salary here determines future raises and salaries as well. Even $100 adds up to $30,000 over 30 years of employment, and that's not even considering cumulative interest. It is likely your employer is open to having this conversation, and even if there is no change in your compensation, it may put you at a more equal footing to your supervisor. It is an opening to learn about how funding and financing in your team and organization works, and this is very valuable information. Keep in mind that it is always more difficult and expensive to bring on a new employee and train them compared to keeping you, even with higher compensation.

To give an idea of the real costs of your labor, take for example a yearly $80,000 salary (this is a reasonable salary for the DC area where the median yearly rental rates as of March 2023 is $31,200) as your 1.0 full time equivalent (FTE) rate. On top of this, the host organization may take an additional 30% fringe costs (note that the percentages listed here vary from institution but are provided to give you a rough idea of what to expect), which covers healthcare, retirement, and other benefits. Furthermore, the host organization charges an additional 28% to run their organization, resulting in a total cost of ~$133,000 per FTE. There may be additional GSFC-fees depending on how your grant is structured. The difference between the contracting organization is in how much their overhead is and what benefits you receive. Ultimately, this will make your contribution to a proposal more or less expensive per FTE.

Aside from your salary, you can expect to receive benefits. Health care (medical, vision, and dental) is your prime benefit and differs per employing organization. Depending on the institution that has hired you, you may not receive detailed benefit information until the offer is accepted. Also, note that your healthcare may not start from day one of your employment and that there are differences in the coverage offered by the different universities. Be sure to do your research on healthcare before you start. Even if you do not receive this information from your hiring co-op university with your offer, the health insurance provided by many universities -- both public and some private institutions -- is publicly available online. This is crucial because if you are working at a university with your cooperative agreement that provides healthcare that is insufficient for your needs, you may be able to change host institutions to one that provide health insurance that *is* sufficient for your needs (to change institutions within CRESST II, you can email Lee Cheyne: leland.cheyne@nasa.gov and Lee Mundy: lgm@umd.edu) and to change institutions within PHASER, email Bob Robinson: robert.m.robinson@nasa.gov).

Other benefits include your retirement plan, life insurance, non-taxed travel or medical spending accounts, paid time off (PTO), and family leave. While you may not be able to change universities within your co-op based on the differences between these benefits, knowing these benefits prior to accepting your offer (this is also publicly available for public and some private universities) can help put your decision to accept your offer versus looking for jobs elsewhere in perspective.