

Dear Nature,

The Careers article “Side jobs for scientists”¹ paints a naïve and insensitive picture of the financial/social realities facing many graduate students and other early-career researchers. Nature missed an opportunity to acknowledge that the financial strains faced by many students and postdocs are due to (a) low pay for skilled student labor and (b) managing family care responsibilities. For many early-career scientists, second jobs are less about career development and more about paying rent, feeding themselves and their families, and covering childcare or eldercare costs. The idea that extra income could somehow be used as savings for retirement shows the severe naivety with which the article approaches what is a particularly pernicious problem in academia.

The modern reality is that academia is not populated by just young graduate students supported by wealthy families to pursue science unfettered by non-scholarly concerns. The article ignores stressors that second jobs place on working parents or other students who are primarily responsible for family care. Claiming that “any such work must come in lieu of leisure time” makes a faulty assumption that students’ lives consist of little more than lab work and leisure. Aside from missing other key aspects of “work” for graduate students (like balancing research with teaching and coursework completion), the article also misses the point that work-life balance is comprised of managing work with a variety of demands beyond leisure, such as home responsibilities, community involvement, and self-care activities to sustain health (i.e., sleep/exercise). Additionally, presenting a bartending job as an enjoyable side activity that promotes work-life balance is so far out of the typical realm of the motivation and experiences of students working second jobs that it borders on propaganda to justify low graduate student pay.

Perhaps most seriously, the article ignores how low pay presents a very real barrier to science careers for many people with diverse life circumstances and socio-economic backgrounds. This is especially the case for people who cannot rely on family or other outside support, a challenge that disproportionately affects racial and ethnic groups that are still underrepresented in science. Low graduate student pay is also likely to provide a disproportionate barrier to women in science given that childcare and eldercare responsibilities still fall to them. Given Nature’s prominence in the academy, it is unconscionable that it continues to publish this and other editorial pieces² that—instead of promoting dialogue about how to make science more inclusive to a diverse community of scientists—shun, demoralize, and reinforce the often toxic environment science creates for underrepresented groups.

For students already taking on enormous undergraduate debt, the message that the only way to succeed in graduate school is to work two jobs and potentially hide it from their advisors is irresponsible. It glamorizes “moonlighting” activities rather than acknowledging them as a sad reality of academia’s hostile environment for early career researchers that have obligations/ambitions of lives outside of science. This is not the message that a leading science journal like Nature should be promoting. Instead, Nature should be giving more voice to people promoting serious structural solutions to resolve financial burdens and inequities in science training and education.

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1. Nature 549:297-299 (14 Sep 2017), doi:10.1038/nj7671-297a, <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v549/n7671/full/nj7671-297a.html>
2. Nature 549:5–6 (07 September 2017), doi:10.1038/549005b, <https://www.nature.com/news/science-must-acknowledge-its-past-mistakes-and-crimes-1.22557>