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In search of the truth

In an ideal world, lab heads would adopt a 'truth in advertising' policy when it comes to academic career prospects for new graduates. This they would fulfil in a welcoming speech, as well as by posting a prominent message on bulletin boards next to the yellowing *Far Side* cartoons. A potted version, suitable for adopting, adapting or ignoring is as follows:

"Welcome to my lab. I managed to rise to this position through a combination of talent, diligence and luck — the last two of which were the most important. I'm sorry to inform you that the odds of landing a similar position are not great. Although almost all of you probably want to become tenured professors, less than half of you are likely to make it. There just aren't that many open positions, and indications are that there never will be. Sure, your government has been talking up increased funding for the sciences, but much of that money — if it ever really materializes — is likely to go on infrastructure (governments love to build things) or on bigger grants for people already in the business.

"Also, if I haven't yet scared you off the tenure track, please let me take this opportunity to try. It's a long, long, road. I, fortunately, only had to do one short postdoc. You, on the other hand, may need to do several longer ones — unless you pick a good principal investigator and get lucky and publish a stellar paper your first time out. Sure, it can happen, but please don't count on it.

"But fear not. Even if you don't get a tenure-track position, you have alternatives. Industry is not necessarily an evil entity — I've heard that some companies actually let you publish. Also, more research institutions are moving towards short-term contracts; this is not necessarily a bad thing. And finally, some of you may find success in non-traditional areas such as law, finance and the media. If you land one of these positions, you may be entitled to feel as smug as I."

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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