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An infinite learning curve

Writer David Foster Wallace's most famous works, *Everything and More* and *Infinite Jest*, are concerned literally and metaphorically with infinity. Wallace sometimes describes himself as "ridiculously overeducated" — a description that many scientists, with years of postgraduate education and postdoctoral training under their belts, will recognize. Yet, like Wallace, these scientists still feel the need to learn more.

Of course, this desire can be satiated by simply picking up a book to explore a different discipline. But in recent years more formal mechanisms for expanding education have begun emerging. These are helping scientists learn how to work across disciplines and often provide career workshops to give them off-the-bench skills.

One programme, run by the US National Institutes of Health, trains chemists, engineers, physicists and mathematicians in biological research. Since it launched in 2000, more than 120 mid-career scientists have gone back to the classroom to pursue years of additional coursework. Members of its first class are now ready to combine their physical background with a newfound

biological education, which should make them more effective interdisciplinary researchers (see page 470).

Another programme, run by the US-based Committee on the Advancement of Women Chemists (see page 592), offers workshops to help female chemists and engineers leap gender hurdles. These courses emphasize communication, leadership and negotiation skills. So far the workshops have proved to be a big success with participants and, as a result, the organization is considering expanding its reach to Europe.

The interest in both of these programmes shows that there is nothing ridiculous about education beyond the PhD and postdoc. Whether skills are scientific or off-the-bench, in today's competitive environment, the need to learn more seems to go on and on, ad infinitum.



Paul Smaglik, Naturejobs editor

CONTACTS

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

US Head Office, New York
 345 Park Avenue South, 10th Floor,
 New York, NY 10010-1707
 Tel: +1 800 989 7718
 Fax: +1 800 989 7103
 e-mail: naturejobs@natureny.com

US Sales Manager/Corporations:
 Peter Bless
 Classified Sales Representatives
 Tel: +1 800 989 7718

**New York/Pennsylvania/
 Latin America:** Kelly Roman
**Midwest USA/Maryland/
 NIH:** Wade Tucker
East USA/Canada:
 Janine Taormina

**San Francisco Office
 Classified Sales Representative:**
 Michaela Bjorkman
 West USA/West Corp. Canada
 225 Bush Street, Suite 1453
 San Francisco, CA 94104
 Tel: +1 415 781 3803
 Fax: +1 415 781 3805
 e-mail: m.bjorkman@naturesf.com

European Head Office, London
 The Macmillan Building,
 4 Crinan Street,
 London N1 9XW, UK
 Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
 Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
 e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs Sales Director: Nevin Bayoumi (4978)
European Sales Manager: Andy Douglas (4975)

Advertising Production Manager: Billie Franklin
 To send materials use London address above.
 Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
 Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
 e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs web development: Tom Hancock
Naturejobs online production: Niamh Shields

European Satellite Office
 Patrick Phelan
 e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com

Japan Head Office, Tokyo
 Chiyoda Building,
 2-37 Ichigayatamachi,
 Shinjuku-ku,
 Tokyo 162-0843
 Tel: +81 3 3267 8751
 Fax: +81 3 3267 8746
Asia-Pacific Sales Director: Rinoko Asami
 e-mail: rasami@naturejpn.com