

NEWS

Spectrum Launch: The hidden costs of conference travel

BY ANGIE VOYLES ASKHAM

6 APRIL 2023

Parsa Taheri, a first-year graduate student at the University of Houston in Texas, learned the hard way that academia's reimbursement culture doesn't work for many early-career researchers.

Taheri paid more than \$1,000 out of pocket to attend the 2023 Society for Research in Child Development conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Fortunately, she had secured a travel award from her university to cover some of the amount, but those funds didn't become available until after she returned from her trip and provided receipts for her conference registration, flight and hotel. So in the meantime, those expenses — significant for someone on a graduate student stipend — sat on her credit card for months, temporarily knocking down her credit score, she says.

Even when a graduate student is funded by a grant that covers conference-related expenses, they are still often required to pay upfront and seek reimbursement after the trip. Graduate students “are just expected to have that money,” or the ability to use credit, Taheri says. “So it becomes a huge equity issue.”

Researchers who can't afford to attend conferences can end up “at a bit of a disadvantage, research-wise,” says **Lillian Brady**, a postdoctoral researcher at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. “Part of academic science, or research in general, is being able to communicate your science and get to know people in your field.”

Many travel awards don't cover the full cost of conference attendance, particularly as travel expenses rise with inflation, Brady says. She says she tends to apply for several at a time, in hopes of getting at least one.

Conferences organizers often offer travel awards, as do scientific societies and a researcher's home institution. And applicants don't always have to be members of a conference's organization or society to apply, Taheri says — something she wishes she had known earlier. It can also help to

be selective about which conferences to attend in person rather than virtually. Taheri says she now plans to attend one large meeting a year and seek out additional regional conferences that could get her face time on a low budget.

But the system also needs to change, she says. If universities are going to stick to reimbursements, then “they should at least happen on a quicker basis.”

Book of the month:

Tomasz Nowakowski, associate professor of neurological surgery at the University of California, San Francisco, recommends “**Does God Play Dice? The New Mathematics of Chaos**,” by Ian Stewart — so much so that he says he “practically grew up reading” the non-fiction book, which tackles the mathematics of chaos theory.

Jobs, trainings and funds:

- Current or recently graduated Ph.D. students who research childhood disability can apply for **Holland Bloorview’s 2023 Pursuit Award**. Applications are due 18 July.
- **Mirella Dapretto** and **Shulamite Green** at the University of California, Los Angeles, are hiring a **staff research associate** to help coordinate participant recruitment and data collection and assist with grants and publications for their autism neuroimaging studies.
- **Alessandro Gozzi**, senior researcher at the Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia in Rovereto, Italy, **seeks a Ph.D. student** to study the mechanisms of brain connectivity in the mammalian brain.
- Western University in London, Ontario, Canada, has three open positions for **postdoctoral fellows** in the Group for Advanced Neural Circuits.
- **Eric Levine**, professor of neuroscience at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine in Farmington, is hiring a **postdoctoral researcher** for his lab, which focuses on synaptic modulation in the hippocampus and cortex.

Recommended resources:

- **Haili Hu** of Utrecht University in the Netherlands grew up poor and often felt like an outsider in academia, but being open about her background has helped her connect with her colleagues, she writes in an **article** for *Science*.
- Autistic people considering a career in academia should be sure to find supportive colleagues, remember their well-being and “proceed with caution but with passion,” according to a **survey** of current autistic academics, published last month in *Autism*.
- When working on a new talk, it helps to start with a simple narrative, writes **David Rubenson**, director of the scientific communications firm NoBadSlides in Los Angeles, California, in a **career column** for *Nature*. “The audience will remember few, if any, specific slides the day after your talk ... think about the two or three main ideas you hope they will

remember.”

- Researchers can make change in their communities by publishing opinion pieces and making effective use of social media, said **Gundula Bosch**, program director at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, in an **online talk** for the Society for Neuroscience.
- An **article** in *Trends in Pharmacological Sciences* provides tips to make letters of recommendation equitable for scientists, especially those from underrepresented groups.
- In an **article** for the Institute of Mathematical Statistics, **Daniela Witten**, professor of biostatistics at the University of Washington in Seattle, writes about the challenges she faced as a researcher and new parent. “[G]etting tenure is not the hardest thing I’ve ever done. It also is not the most rewarding. After all, my publications will never love me back. But, I will also never need to help them poop.”

Any suggestions for how to make this newsletter as useful as possible, or recommendations for what topic we should cover next? Send them to angie@spectrumnews.org.

Cite this article: <https://doi.org/10.53053/ADMU7670>