

# A missing influence in keeping diversity within the academy?

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A new study of science PhDs who embarked on careers between 2004 and 2014 showed that while nearly two-thirds chose employment outside academic science, their reasons for doing so had little to do with the advice they received from faculty advisors, other scientific mentors, family, or even graduate school peers. The 3,669 PhDs, including 225 from underrepresented minority (URM) backgrounds, said that they made the decision to stay or leave academia primarily on their own. Reasons given included a desire for autonomy, leadership roles, prestige, high salaries, work variety, and opportunities for one's partner, according to the paper about to be published in *CBE-Life Sciences Education* (LSE) by researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC), Harvard Law School, and The Jackson Laboratory.

This study, reported in a special issue of LSE, was led by Rebekah L. Layton in the UNC Office of Graduate Education and principal investigator Melanie Sinche, formerly of the Labor & Worklife Program at Harvard Law School, currently with The Jackson Laboratory. UNC collaborators included Patrick D. Brandt, Ashalla M. Freeman, Jessica R. Harrell, and Joshua D. Hall. The authors noted that broadening scientific workforce diversity has been an official policy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for decades, yet the percentage of URM scientists who hold faculty positions today is still well below their representation in the general U.S. population. Compounding the problem has been the swelling number of students entering PhD training in science while the number of tenure-track academic positions has stagnated. Unsurprisingly, 63 percent of the new doctorate holders,

including URM PhDs, reported leaving academia, degree in hand.

Layton et al. wanted a closer look at the decision-making process behind the stay-leave decision of recent PhDs, seeking particular insights into the URM contingent of the exodus. The researchers expected job prospects and conditions to be strong factors but were startled by how little influence the advice of academic mentors, families, or friends counted. They reported, "Furthermore, endorsement of faculty advisor or other mentor influence, and family or peer influence, were surprisingly rare across groups, suggesting that formal and informal support networks could provide a missed opportunity to provide support for trainees who want to stay in faculty career paths." Not to make better use of these networks to support newly minted PhDs from URM backgrounds as they make their stay-leave decision is a missed opportunity to slow the URM exodus, say the authors.

**More information:** *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, [DOI: 10.1187/cbe.16-01-0066](https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-01-0066)

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