Managing my fear of missing out

"You have a lot of jobs." That’s something that I hear all the time when I talk to folks about how I’ve included science in my life. At the moment I technically have three jobs—a full-time science communication and policy role, a science storytelling gig with shows every few months, and a monthlong teaching position each summer—and I recently picked up an adjunct position, so make that four. Why do I have all these jobs? Well, I have science FOMO. Short for “fear of missing out,” FOMO describes the feelings of someone who just can’t say “no” to anything, even when they’re already overextended. In social contexts, I’m OK with missing out. But when it comes to science, I feel the need to seize every opportunity.

I don’t think that I’m the only former academic in this predicament. My attitude is likely a carryover of a mentality ingrained in graduate students: Do everything you can and expect little in return. As a student, in addition to my academic responsibilities, I represented my department in student government, was an outreach liaison to a conservation organization, and regularly talked about my research at outreach events. At the time, I believed that I was doing all of these things to add to my CV. Looking back, though, I realize that I was also driven by a nagging concern that I was never doing enough. I took on as much as I could in part to alleviate those doubts. It wouldn’t be the last time.

FOMO kicked in again when I decided to leave academia after getting my Ph.D. I worried that being away from research would make me forget my academic training and that I would lose contact with my former colleagues. I even thought that I would get dumber if I wasn’t actively planning research projects. So, during my John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I used my vacation time—and oftentimes cobbled together my own funds—to continue attending conferences, keeping up on current research, and writing manuscripts related to conservation biology. It was tough to manage at times—I essentially had two jobs, even though one didn’t pay—but the reward of feeding my scientific interests kept me at it.

After the fellowship, I bounced around between short-term and temporary positions, trying to find the right combination of activities to satisfy my FOMO. I was a science policy and communications fellow at the National Academy of Sciences, where I told a story for the science storytelling organization The Story Collider. I wrote questions for a science quiz bowl organization. I started teaching an annual, monthlong field course in disease ecology. I was feeding my FOMO, but as time passed, I struggled with the lack of professional and financial security. I didn’t just want a job; I wanted a career. And, I reasoned, I could still do all of these “extra” activities in addition to a full-time job.

I eventually found my place at the American Geophysical Union, where I help fellow scientists communicate their research to broad audiences. I dabble in communications, policy, teaching, and academia, which should satisfy my FOMO. And it does—but not entirely. So I still teach the field course every year. I started cohosting and producing Story Collider shows. I’ve also recently picked up an adjunct teaching position in an environmental management department. And I imagine that I’ll be involved with more activities in the future, both because I enjoy the opportunities to do new things and to quell the internal voice that still sometimes tells me that I’m not doing enough.

FOMO has given me the drive to explore many different ways of working in science. But I have also realized that sometimes it can be too much, so I need to make sure that it doesn’t rule me. In addition to being a scientist, I’m also a partner, a son, a friend, an uncle. I’m not going to let my science FOMO cause me to miss out on life.

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