

PHYSICS COMMUNITY

Are Scientists Ready for Prime Time?

As every reader of this magazine well knows, when it comes to sheer white-knuckle excitement, nothing beats the life of a physicist. So how come there are no physicists on prime-time television?

Well, there may be someday, if Leon Lederman has his way. He's leading an effort to develop a prime-time TV drama series along the lines of "ER" or "NYPD Blue," except with scientists instead of doctors or cops. The show would depict the goings-on at a top-flight research center known as the GRALE Institute, home to a brilliant staff of physicists, geneticists, computer experts and brain researchers. (GRALE stands for General Research at the Leading Edge.)

The show's writer is Adrian Malone, who at one time was the senior science producer for the BBC. Though he's done plenty of science films and documentaries, "GRALE" is his first drama series. The main difference is that the new show aims to entertain rather than educate, Malone said. "In the doing, if we manage to convey some information, well then fine." The science is all real, he added, "although we may stretch the possibilities." A plot thread in the show's proposed pilot, for instance, involves a potentially apocalyptic particle accelerator experiment with Bose-Einstein condensates. Two of the physicist characters also become entangled in "an unusual love story," Malone hinted, but refused to elaborate.

"We're trying to break the stereotype of the nerdy 'Honey, I Shrunk the Kids' scientist, the guy in a white lab coat with a pocket protector," said Lederman, a professor of science at the Illinois Institute of Technology and director emeritus of Fermilab. "We'll show scientists who are motivated by ego or greed or passion," scientists who are compelling, dynamic and, yes, even sexy. Certain aspects important to doing science will also be conveyed, such as skepticism and curiosity.

Lederman said the idea of a TV drama first came up about 10 years ago, as a group of scientists in Chicago puzzled over how to raise public understanding of science. A prime-time series about scientists, they reasoned, might grab the attention of a mainstream audience—all those tens of millions of viewers who don't tune in to PBS or the Discovery Channel. Last year the US Department of Energy and

the National Science Foundation, through its elementary, secondary and informal education division, put up a total of \$100 000 to get the project started. With most of that money gone, network sponsorship and a prime-time TV producer are now being sought.

So if scientists create a TV show, will people watch? A quick and unscientific poll conducted along a Brooklyn street indicated they might. Kevin Dresser, a design student at Pratt Institute, said a series about scientists sounded as worthwhile as anything else on television. "I'm sure [the producers] could make a scientist's life seem really outrageous and intense," he said. "I mean, it's TV—they can do that."

JEAN KUMAGAI

Fewer Bachelor's Degrees in 1994

Recipients of physics bachelor's degrees in the US in 1994 totaled 4615, 8% less than in 1989, according to a recent report by the American Institute of Physics. Of the 93% who were US citizens, 88% were white, 4% African American, another 4% Asian American and 3% Hispanic American.

As in past years, graduate school was the preferred destination for the class of 1994, with 33% opting for physics or astronomy and 21% choosing some other field, such as engineering or medicine.

Among the 39% of baccalaureate recipients who planned to enter the job market after graduation, nearly a third said they expected to go on to graduate school after one year of employment.

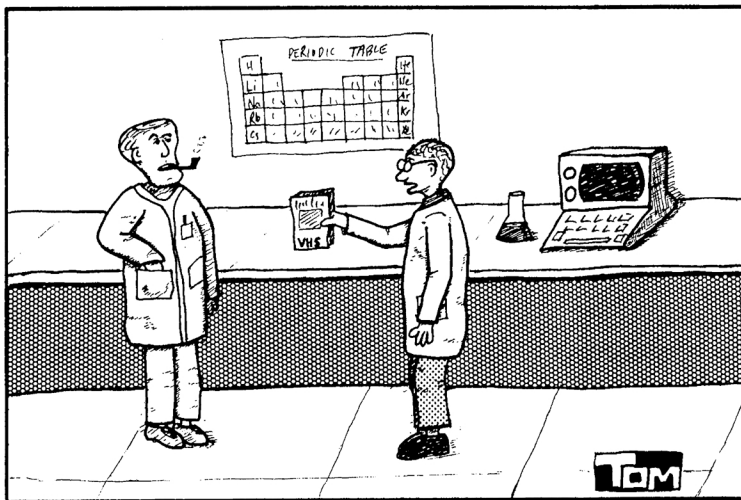
Only 11% reported receiving more than one job offer, while nearly a fourth had gotten no offers when the survey was conducted (in the early 1980s, by comparison, 30–40% got multiple offers). Among those who found full-time work, about half were hired by industry, traditionally the largest employer of recent physics graduates. The military continued to be the second largest employer overall, although far more men than women filled those jobs. The proportion who found work in secondary schools doubled between 1989 and 1994, and now represents one tenth of the employed physics baccalaureates. The median starting salary overall was \$27 000.

Single copies of the 1994 *Bachelor's Degree Recipients Report* are available free of charge. Contact the American Institute of Physics, Education and Employment Statistics Division, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, Maryland 20740-3843; phone 301-209-3070; e-mail stats@aip.org.

AAS Elects New Vice President

This month, Edward B. Jenkins begins a three-year term as vice president of the American Astronomical Society. Jenkins, a senior research astronomer at Princeton University, joins the society's two other vice presidents, Neta Bahcall and Jonathan E. Grindlay. The current president of AAS is Andrea K. Dupree.

Jenkins holds a 1966 PhD from Cornell University and has done research on the interstellar and intergalactic



Oh, it's your standard "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy invents a new deposition technique for ultra-thin-film rare earth superconductors, boy gets girl back."