

But You Have the Whole Summer Off, Right?

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ABSTRACT: Managing expectations about serving academic roles may be more important than ever. Among the agenda items of some political constituencies are changes to higher education. In the context of some misconceptions about what academic faculty do, arguments are made.

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Recently, your Editor was having a neighborly chat within a day or two of his moving to a new house. While being supportive of additional activities related to the move, one of the participants in the conversation blurted out a phrase that has become familiar over the decades of my career, “But you have the whole summer off, right?” Not all such comments are well-meaning and many of them are even less well-informed. The person who said it recently has lived in Athens, Georgia, a university town, for many years and should know how the academic enterprise works. These misconceptions about the role and activities of faculty, instructors, graduate students, and staff become more apparent when one pays close attention to the content of neighborly chats or what one reads in the news.

As a faculty member at a public university, one becomes sensitive to the subtle interplay between the institution and one of its financial benefactors, the state and voters that it serves. At my institution, we take the mission of educating the sons and daughters of Georgia seriously; this is particularly true for those of us who serve the large introductory courses. Based on conversations with a substantial number of parents, it is not always clear that they (and by inference, other citizens of the state) understand and appreciate the multiple roles, responsibilities, and activities of typical faculty members. A single section of 370 students doesn’t sound like much if you only consider the contact hours or even include content preparation, assessment and testing, office hours, and other administrative work. But some of us direct research activities of undergraduate and graduate students, compete for grants to fund the research enterprise, provide service to academic institutions and professional organizations, and keep current in our scholarship and teaching through various professional development activities like reading, reviewing, and writing for journals. To that point (but a number of years ago), a cynical state legislator pointed out that professors sat and around and got paid for “reading magazines”. Of course, he was referring to professional journals. His perspective and expectations were very different from the one just stated. In some respects, the situation has not changed much in the last 30 years. Even without a good sense of what we already do, legislators want us to do more for less. Among new legislation introduced this year are items that would increase university faculty workloads,¹ that would ban public unions on campus,² that would ban the teaching of some AP courses,³ that eliminate or redefine tenure,⁴ and many others. Even in a political climate that has seen substantial increases in libertarianism,⁵ the

urge to legislate behavior related to education and especially higher education is too great to resist. Irrespective of political affiliation, being elected to public office apparently makes one “smart” about many subjects, including higher education.

What can be done? Let me start by addressing the first misconception, the idea of having the summer off. This notion reminded me about something learned while “reading magazines” in the early part of my career. As a practitioner of physical organic chemistry and organic photochemistry, one reads of the work of Giacomo Ciamician,⁶ an Italian photochemist at the University of Bologna who worked and published in the late 1880s to early 1920s. Many of his results have withstood the test of time, a criterion for good science. In addition, Ciamician predicted a bright future for solar energy. The intent here is not to trivialize this work but rather to focus on part of the methodology: his research group prepared the liquid samples in sealed glass tubes in the spring, left them on the roof of the building to photolyze in July and August, and analyzed them in the fall and winter. Apparently, Ciamician spent July and August at the coast, a summer tradition carried out in much of Italy to this day. It is not entirely clear that the time at the coast was the same as “having the entire summer off” but that romanticized idea has been in my head for almost 40 years.

The second anecdote comes from W. T. Lippincott, who served as the fifth *JCE* editor-in-chief from 1967–1979.⁷ Several of his editorials address the summer (with a few having “August” in the title). In “The August Ailment”,⁸ a clear case has been made for the perils of working through the summer, particularly at *JCE*:

In this hemisphere and south of the 45th Parallel, August is an incredibly difficult month in which to have to work... Add to this the ridiculous combination of daily contacts with wilted colleagues (their objectivity short-circuited by the humidity, their sparse humor transformed to truculence by the temperature)... Even the classroom loses its normally irresistible appeal... The manuscripts that arrive during August are not much better. Some smell fishy. Others have suffered considerable smoke damage. A few are soiled with an oil which our spectroscopists have identified as a mixture of suntan lotion and barbecue sauce. The syntax and style of these manuscripts suggest a greater than usual casualness in their preparation, and the cogency and general scientific competence seems to reflect a subtle denaturation of cranial proteolipids in our authors.

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Lippincott makes several convincing arguments about the pitfalls of working through the summer. Apparently, air conditioning, different publishing paradigms, and perhaps even the threats of legislative action on academic institutions have changed the circumstances of *JCE* submission between 1968 and the present. Currently, the number and quality of submissions throughout the year is almost invariant (~20 manuscripts per week), although it is clear that most academic authors work on the semester system, endeavoring to clear their desks of new or revised submissions by the end of the term.

Returning to how we address misconceptions about academic roles, each of us has to make our own decision about the summer but more importantly about how we address the role and importance of chemical education to our friends, colleagues, and the world around us. "Having the summer off" may be a trivial example of how aspects of the academic world are misunderstood. However, we should all endeavor to promote a better understanding of what we all do and how it has an impact on our society, economy, and culture.

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Notes

Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the ACS.

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- (5) For definitions of libertarianism, see (a) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarianism> and (b) <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/libertarian> (both accessed Jun 2015).
- (6) For a brief biography of Giacomo Ciamician, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giacomo_Luigi_Ciamician (accessed Jun 2015).
- (7) For a summary of *JCE* editors prior to the current one, see Guiding the Journal of Chemical Education. *J. Chem. Educ.* **1998**, 75 (11), 1373–1380.
- (8) Lippincott, W. T. The August Ailment. *J. Chem. Educ.* **1968**, 45 (8), 497.