On those days, I feel like Hannah Montana.

It was weird. When I applied to college, every school wanted applicants with diverse interests. “Show us that you dabble in everything!” they enthused. “We don’t just want good students. We want biomedical-engineer-Civil-War-reenactor-Olympic-gymnasts who breed turtles and founded a charity while editing the yearbook! Also, give us money.”

I learned, for example, that I would be at a disadvantage because I didn’t play sports. (Consequently, I oversold my third-place finish in a summer camp wrestling match, neglecting to mention that (a) there were only four competitors, (b) the fourth never showed up, and (c) I was so underweight that I mainly wrestled—and lost to—kids several years younger than me. Toddlers, basically.)

But when I applied to grad school, the game changed. Suddenly, extracurricular activities were a detriment—what graduate biology department cares what I did in the marching band? “Mellophone, you say? Why, that’s the instrument of a budding virologist! Give this man a pipette!”

I even worried about diversity of academic pursuits. I realized that my CV followed a bimodal distribution: Half of the listings pertained to science, and half were other things like writing and theater. So I called each individual department and asked: When reading my application, would the committee rather see that I’m well-rounded or that I’m 100% dedicated to molecular biology?

What happened next shocked me: Every school gave a different answer. Some said, “We love well-rounded students! Tell us about your far-flung interests! Why, we even have a postdoc now who plays semiprofessional jai alai!” But other schools said, “Um … 100% focused on molecular biology, please. The sheer fact that we’re having this conversation means that you possess communication skills, upon which we frown.”

So, for half of the schools, I showed them everything. For the other half, I submitted a CV that basically read, “Biology. I do biology, just biology. I have no other interests besides biology biology biology zebrafish nematodes xenopus.”

I soon learned, however, that this aversion to well-roundedness didn’t stop with grad school admissions committees. Scientists with outside interests are often regarded with suspicion in the lab; we can be seen as undedicated, unfocused,
easily distracted, and so divorced from the scientific frame of mind that we’ll probably end up working in—oh, the shame—industry.

Click here to enlarge image
My outside interest during grad school—my “Batman job,” as a grad student from Case Western Reserve University called it last month—was stand-up comedy. (I quickly learned that audiences in downtown Baltimore aren’t fans of math puns. Like this one: “I was curious about the alcohol content of my mouthwash, but the label on the bottle didn’t say anything about it. I guess the proof was beyond the text of this Scope!” And that’s why I’m not famous.)

One day, my adviser called me into his office. The campus newspaper had just published a little profile of the stand-up-comedy-performing grad student, and my adviser happened to read it. Over the next 10 minutes, I learned that my hobby was an embarrassment to the department, that there was no way I could properly focus on biology, and that every negative lab result I ever produced was a direct result of telling jokes at night.

For a moment, I even believed it was true. I pictured my bacteria saying to each other, “We cannot undergo binary fission in the beaker of someone who makes pithy observations at open-mic nights! Lyse, my little friends, lyse!” After that, I made sure to keep all talk of comedy quiet in front of my adviser, and the perception of underperformance dissipated. I kept my Batman job secret—which made it all the more Batman.

I even came up with a few conversational tips to make myself appear less well-rounded. Feel free to use these to disguise your own outside interests:

• If asked “What did you do this weekend?” answer one of the following:
  o “I dry-heaved with sorrow over the prospect of not being in the lab.”
  o “Nothing beyond the basic functions required to sustain life.”
  o “There was a weekend?”

• If a conversation happens to approach your area of interest, dismiss the subject quickly while revealing nothing about your own expertise:

  CO-WORKER: You have to see this funny clip of bears playing cribbage!
  YOU (who happens to train bears to play cribbage in the evening): Bears playing cribbage! Poppycock! Oh ho, that’s rich. I’ll bet they don’t even use the tournament long board sanctioned by the American Cribbage Congress. Next I suppose you’ll tell me that the bears throw defensively to the crib to avoid breaking up a chance for a 4-6 double run!

• Do not wear a costume to your lab’s Halloween party, because this shows you spend your free time on crafts. If asked, “What are you supposed to be?” look distracted and answer, “I’m supposed to be working.” Then shake your head in
disappointment at their costumes, and note your disappointment in your lab notebook.

• Nothing drains time from lab work like family; therefore, purge all references to family from your workplace. Only speak your spouse’s name in a whisper. On Take Your Child to Work Day, bring a pet, but don’t show it any affection. And replace photos of beloved family members on your desk with photos of scientific collaborators. (This may require the purchase of new picture frames, as you could find it difficult to justify the existence of a photo of your colleague at the University of Florida inside a frame that reads, “I Love Daddy!”)

I knew there was a lot I could learn from my adviser. He was a wise man with lots of grant money. But this time I knew he was wrong, and I still believe that. There’s nothing wrong with scientists having outside interests, and your time outside the lab is your own.

Nor was I the only student with extracurricular activities. Nearly everyone, it seemed, had a Batman job. One student worked in a dance studio. Another was a deejay. Another ran marathons. Still another played 8 hours of video games a day—not a Batman job exactly, although it’s possible he sometimes played games involving Batman. And one grad student had two kids, which I now know occupies more time and attention than any dinky second career telling math puns to drunk people.

It’s good that science accepts those with broad interests. Despite what half of the grad schools told me, tunnel vision is not a virtue. I met a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology a few weeks ago who told me he Batmanned as the lead singer of a punk band, a career he’s maintained alongside science for decades. By day, he lectures at an Ivy League school. At night, he rocks out. His musical career makes him a better professor, but I’m sure there are times he’s under pressure to say, “What punk band? Don’t ask me about The Offspring unless you want a lecture on Mendelian inheritance.”

Even now, I downplay my nighttime activities at work, partly out of paranoia that someone in a position of power will react the same way my grad school adviser did. Yet, when I arrive at work in the morning remembering the previous night’s performance, my secret second career helps me dream bigger, maybe even make connections in the lab that I would have missed. On those days, I feel like Hannah Montana.

I’m not saying that Batmanning always works. As with anything, you need to be sure that the hobby doesn’t creep over into your career, lest you find yourself training bears to play cribbage during the workday.

CO-WORKER: Hey, what’s that bear doing in the lab?
ME: Uh, I wouldn’t know. That must be someone else’s bear.
CO-WORKER: Are you sure?
ME: Definitely. Because *my* bear would never get double skunked by throwing consecutive cards into the opposition crib. *Would* he, Mister Growls? There is, of course, something to be said for deep focus on your subject. Mathematician Paul Erdős famously spent 19 hours a day doing math, and he may be the most prolific mathematician who ever lived. For him, scrapbooking or fantasy football wouldn’t have been a much-needed mental “reset”; it would only have wasted valuable math time. But for the rest of us, outside interests keep us sharp. We’re more productive, more creative. We’re happier. And Gotham City is safe once more.

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