

PERSPECTIVE

Too poor to science: How wealth determines who succeeds in STEM

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STEM is profoundly shaped by wealth, yet financial privilege is rarely acknowledged in discussions of diversity and inclusion. Wealth influences participation, persistence, and recognition in science, affecting not just who enters the pipeline but also who can afford to stay.



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Abbreviations: DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion; STEM, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Behind the pursuit of scientific discovery lies a less-visible truth: a career in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is economically unsustainable, if not entirely unfeasible, for many. The myth of meritocracy in science collapses under the financial sacrifices expected at every career stage. From unpaid internships and self-funded conferences to underpaid graduate and postdoctoral positions, the hidden costs of ‘doing science’ are profound. These burdens disproportionately exclude those without generational wealth, compounded by race and gender. As federal funding declines and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are stripped away in the US, financial divides are widening into chasms, making science less accessible, equitable, and innovative. Ignoring these economic realities risks endangering the future of STEM.

Financial barriers emerge early, restricting students’ ability to build academic capital needed for STEM success. Attending a well-resourced and funded high school provides distinct advantages in terms of STEM exposure, preparation, and eventual access to competitive postgraduate programs [1]. Home resources also matter; students with limited access to computers at home consistently perform worse academically [2]. After-school programs improve academic outcomes but costs and transport often exclude students from low-income backgrounds [3]. Summer camps and enrichment opportunities offer vital development [4,5] but are often prohibitively expensive [6], worsening disparities. Many students from low-income backgrounds work during high school to support families, which negatively affects grades, test scores, and long-term goals, even at low weekly work hours [7]. Undergraduate students face additional financial barriers that hinder entry and success in STEM careers [8]. Attending a prestigious (often costly) college or university

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