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Ranks of Scientists Aging Faster Than Other Workers

By STEPH YINAP

The work force is aging in the United States, and scientists are leading the way. From 1993 to 2008, the share of scientists aged 55 and older increased by nearly 90 percent, according to David Blau and Bruce Weinberg, economics professors at the Ohio State University.

By comparison, the share of all American workers aged 55 and older increased by little more than 50 percent during that period.

Dr. Blau and Dr. Weinberg attributed aging of the scientific work force to its large cohort of baby boomers and a decline in retirement rates, most likely triggered by the elimination of mandatory retirement in universities in 1994.

Using a long-term data set on the career trajectories of 73,000 scientists across many disciplines, Dr. Blau and Dr. Weinberg modeled how the age distribution of this group changed with a dozen demographic factors, including the rates at which scientists obtained doctorates, became employed and retired.

The average age increased from 45.1 to 48.6 from 1993 to 2008, the authors found. Projecting 2008 demographic rates into the future, they reported that — if nothing else changed — the average age would further rise and settle

It is commonly said that scientists do their best work when they are young, and prominent researchers such as Dr. Francis S. Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, have expressed concern that an aging work force might limit opportunities for young researchers, particularly if large cuts are made to funding.

Yet a growing body of research suggests scientists do make important discoveries long into their careers, Dr. Weinberg noted. Moreover, many studies suggest that older workers do not always crowd out younger ones.

The scope of science's aging problem, if it is a problem, remains ill defined, said Sharon Levin, a professor emeritus of economics at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, who was not involved in the study.

The real question, she said: "Can you attract the future stars into this line of work?"

