Student Notebook: Managing Productivity in the Time of COVID-19

April 29, 2020

We're living in unprecedented times. With campuses moving to remote coursework, students and faculty instructed to stay at home, and research being slowed or halted completely, it is easy to become overwhelmed by all the sudden changes. However, amid the chaos, we are still in the midst of our graduate training. The clock is always ticking, so how do we shift gears and get creative when it comes to staying productive?

First, take a moment and remind yourself that nearly every graduate student is experiencing a drop in their productivity; we are all trying to navigate new hurdles to getting work done. This reminder may be good to keep on a Post-it note at your desk so you can continue to reference it until it sinks in. It has been 2 weeks at the time I write this, and I assure you, my Post-it is still up.

The Day-to-Day

Making a schedule and trying your best to follow it can be extremely helpful. Working from home is very different than working from your office or laboratory space. Many people struggle with having their couch and TV so close to them at all times. It is effortless to get sucked into a Netflix series, only

to come-to 8 hours later in the same pajamas, with the same email draft open on your laptop. By adapting your previous schedule to fit the new home restrictions many of us are facing, you can help maintain a sense of normalcy, and avoid getting sucked into the trap of lying around.

If you are usually a morning gym-goer, keep waking up at the same time and go for a run or bike ride, or take advantage of some of the free online workouts being offered. Many gyms and fitness studios are posting virtual classes on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, modified so people can complete them at home with little or no equipment. If it's accountability you need, invite friends to compete in fitness challenges or to use FaceTime or Zoom to take the class with you. Even if the workout isn't as rigorous as your usual gym routine, it can help you stick with your schedule, de-stress a little bit, and combat any additional self-isolation snacking you have been doing.

Get dressed. I know by this time you may have convinced yourself your work pajamas are very different than your sleeping pajamas, but if you take a hard look, you may notice they're quite similar. And if you can work this way, then great! However, if you're anything like me, loungewear signals to the brain that it is time to lounge. For me to be productive, I have to get dressed each morning in something that I would have worn to campus. It doesn't have to be presentation-level formal, but real pants and a sweater can do wonders for sending the message to your brain that it's time to work.

Time to Run the Numbers

Many of us have projects that rely upon in-person testing sessions, undergraduate research pools for subject recruitment, or equipment that can't be used outside of a laboratory, making data collection more challenging or impossible. If your lab doesn't have other data in the analysis stages, this might seem even more overwhelming. Again, look at that Post-it as a reminder: We're all navigating this together.

The best place to start is by scheduling a brief meeting or call with your advisors and lab mates. Take this time to talk through the status of each project in your lab and determine how to proceed. If a study can be moved online, make a plan for each step of the process, including the IRB (Institutional Review Board) amendment, divide up the work, and start checking things off your list one by one. If you have collected data but are unsure if you can access at home, call your IRB and discuss potential options for setting up remote access so you can remain productive without violating any confidentiality clauses. The important thing is to have a clear understanding and agreement about the next steps for each project.

Writers' Retreat

Data collection on hold? No data in the pipeline for analysis? Again, you're not alone. There are other things you can do to remain productive and make the best of your time in graduate training.

We're all being asked to stay home and limit our contact with others. The media is calling this self-isolation, but in the world of academia, we can think of this as an indefinitely long writing retreat. You may want to begin by taking inventory of your poster presentations and any manuscripts you've been working on with colleagues. If you've had manuscript in-prep on your CV for a while, or presentations you've meant to turn into papers for publication, now is the time to get working on those writing

projects.

If you manage to get through all of those projects, there are always review papers. Literature reviews and meta-analyses are notoriously challenging and time-consuming, so this is a great time to tackle larger projects like these. If you're looking for some advice on where to start and other helpful resources, check out the Student Notebook in the March issue of this magazine. Taking time to review the literature can also inspire new project ideas, or help you identify components of the introduction to a thesis or dissertation.

For those who were in the project-development stages when COVID-19 restrictions went into place, you may consider working on the project's protocol as soon as you're able to return to the lab. Now could be an ideal time to write out the protocol, submit your IRB application, and preregister your project with the Center for Open Science on the Open Science Framework.. For projects that require programming an experiment, try using a program that you're not familiar with, and take this extra time to build the specialized skills section of your CV. Step outside your comfort zone and add in exploratory analyses using a new program or method that you can spend some of your time learning at home. Or, if you're applying for funding for an upcoming project, consider working on the draft of your grant application and sending it out for feedback.

Work Independently, Together

You don't have to work on these projects in complete isolation. Reach out to some of the graduate students in your department and see if they'd be willing to have a virtual writing or programming workshop each week. Develop a schedule so you all have goals for the weekly meeting, and rotate which student's writing project is sent out to the group for feedback. And there's no reason you have to restrict these virtual groups to just your department, either. Check out the APS Student Caucus Facebook or Twitter page to connect with fellow APS members and graduate students around the world.

We're all trying to find ways to navigate these waters and build the skills we entered graduate training to grow—no need to do it all on your own.

APS Student Caucus Executive Board Welcomes New Members

The [APSSC Executive Board](#) is responsible for creating strategic plans, goals, and initiatives throughout the year with the purpose of serving the unique needs of APS student affiliates. The board is also responsible for planning student programming at the APS Annual Convention. The following students will begin their term in June for the 2020-2021 academic year:

Amanda Merner (President) Case Western Reserve University, **Kelsie Dawson** (Graduate Advocate) The University of Alabama, **Lorilei Alley** (Past-President) Justus Liebig University Giessen, **Timothy Valshtein** (Undergraduate Advocate) New York University, **Tran Le** (RISE Coordinator) Texas Tech University, **Anna Drozdova** (Communications & Marketing Officer) University of Texas, El Paso, **Luiz Santana** (Student Research Coordinator) University of California, Los Angeles, **Serena**

Zadoorian (Membership & Volunteers Officer) University of California, Riverside, **Ryan Thompson** (Student Notebook Editor) Palo Alto University