Show us the money

Nine months into working in the lab as a Ph.D. student, my professor called me into his office. I expected that he wanted my typical weekly research update, so I was dumbfounded when he told me that the grant supporting my research would expire in 3 months. He went on to say that I needed to start working on one of the other, funded projects in the lab or take on teaching assistantships to cover my stipend. I remained calm on the outside, but inside I was overwhelmed. I worried that changing my research direction would delay my graduation and hurt my publication record, making me less competitive for postdocs down the road. I was also kicking myself for not asking for details about how he would fund me and my work before I joined the lab.

There were good reasons why I hadn’t. When I started grad school, I knew too little about how academic research is paid for to even know which questions to raise. And I worried that asking potential advisers about their grants would come across as rude or disrespectful. So I had kept quiet, opting to remain in the dark rather than risk alienating powerful senior scientists. But this approach left me utterly unprepared for my adviser’s pronouncement, and I wished that I had been more proactive earlier.

I couldn’t go back in time, though, so I spent most of that night coming up with possible solutions. “I can give up on my current project, even though it’s very intellectually engaging, and start working on a topic I’m less excited about,” I thought. “Or maybe I should become a teaching assistant, even though I want to focus on research, or even transfer to a different lab.”

The next morning, I mustered the courage to ask my professor for a follow-up meeting. I told him my concerns about changing projects and shared some of the options I had come up with. Together, we brainstormed about how I could integrate my existing project in neural engineering with one that had more stable funding, on magnetotactic bacteria. Now I work on two separate but interconnected projects that together offer secure funding and intellectual fulfillment. This arrangement has increased my workload, but it has also significantly expanded my areas of expertise, offering me flexibility for my future research.

I wouldn’t say that I’m glad I hit that funding snag, but a year later, I’m happy with my research direction, and I think the experience of working through adversity has helped improve my confidence and my communication skills. I have also found that I’m not the only student whose training has faced potential disruption because of an adviser’s changing funding situation.

A few weeks after my moment of crisis, I shared my experience with some other students, and many similar stories came out. I learned that one friend had to switch projects midway through her Ph.D. for similar reasons, and that some of my colleagues were earning their stipends by taking on extra teaching duties because their professors couldn’t obtain enough funding. A common thread was that none of us had known much about our advisers’ funding before we found ourselves in uncomfortable situations.

Realizing that many of us feared repercussions if we inquired about our professors’ finances and that we felt ashamed about our predicaments, my friends and I set up departmental focus group discussions between administrative staff and graduate students to help us better understand how each lab is funded. It may seem like a small step, but I hope that it will help empower more graduate students to learn about their funding sources and take control of their own financial situation.

For myself, I am glad in hindsight that this issue arose early in my research career. It helped me learn how to come up with creative solutions to a challenge, and it taught me that it’s always better to ask questions, even if it feels awkward or risky, than to stay quiet and hope for the best.

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