

By Kathy Gillen

## Interrupted—again

**T**he two emails arrived the same early April day. One informed me that I had secured a \$3000 grant. Although the dollar value was small, it was a big step toward restarting my research career after a 22-year hiatus. The second email announced that my college had canceled in-person student research for the coming summer because of COVID-19. My newly relaunched research program had abruptly crashed back to Earth.

Two decades earlier, I had left my postdoc—and research—when my husband landed a tenure-track job at a small liberal arts college in a different state. A few years after our move, I was thrilled when an opportunity arose for me to teach at the college. When people asked whether I missed research, my pat response was that I was happy with my job. But that wasn't the full truth. I always felt an unpleasant pit in my stomach while celebrating my husband's grants and publication successes, sad that I couldn't claim the same achievements. And twinges of regret gnawed at me when students in my classes asked whether they could join my research lab and I had to tell them no—I didn't do research anymore.

A few years ago, those twinges grew stronger when a pair of talented students wanted to continue work they had started as an independent research project in one of my lab classes. I would have loved to work with these motivated students after the semester ended. Maybe it was time to explore whether that was possible.

I had always claimed I didn't have a research program because I wasn't a tenure-track professor, but was that really the barrier? Was it just easier to blame my status than to try to get a lab up and running? Was fear of failure holding me back?

Over the following months, the risks of not starting up research—boredom, depression, regret—began to outweigh the risk of trying and failing. I decided to give it a go.

When I reached out to the chair of the department, he said he would support my plan as long as I was mentoring students. Colleagues offered to share equipment, expertise, and space. I had enough money in a college-provided development fund to buy a few reagents. As for a research question, while teaching in the introductory lab I had learned that the worm *Lumbriculus variegatus* was



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inexpensive to work with, and it offered plenty of interesting avenues for investigation. I was ready to go.

In June of 2019, I nervously started to mentor my first group of research students, worried that my skills would be rusty or, worse, obsolete. Indeed, some bread-and-butter techniques from my past were no longer relevant. But I found that the core process of scientific inquiry—asking questions, designing experiments, interpreting data—hadn't changed. And my troubleshooting skills quickly kicked in. Our first western blot looked like a Rorschach test, but after weeks of fine-tuning, we had an interpretable blot—reason for a minor celebration. By the end of the summer, we had generated enough data to put together a poster to present at a conference in January. I left that

meeting feeling optimistic and energized about the future, wondering why I had waited so long to return to research.

Just 3 months after the conference my research was interrupted again—frustrating, to say the least. But despite the COVID-19 restrictions, I have found ways to carry on. I am currently collaborating remotely with a student who was slated for full-time lab research this summer. We hatched a plan: He designs experiments, and I do the hands-on work. From there, he interprets the data and plans the next steps. It's not ideal, but we are making progress.

Even in normal circumstances, research is hard. This summer, our results have been confusing, and at times I have felt like throwing in the towel. But I remember how much I enjoyed the summer of 2019, and that I chose this path. If I could overcome my fears and return to research after a 22-year break, I won't let a slowdown stop me now. ■

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