Dear NextGen VOICES peer mentors,

I am a young researcher with research proposals but no funding. My grant applications are still pending. My contract requires me to publish, but I can't conduct experiments or produce reliable results without funding. With restrictions in place for COVID-19, I have limited access to my lab. How can I use this time most effectively to ensure that I can stay in academia long-term?

Sincerely, Funding Fix

Hone your skills

How can you turn the time created by this pandemic into a blessing? Faced with similar challenges, I have tried to upgrade my skills to work remotely, manage effectively, network extensively, and expand my knowledge through webinars, online conferences, and seminars. I suggest using this time to increase your knowledge by reading extensively in your research area. Write reviews, book chapters, or a short piece analyzing old data. Find collaborators who can give you access to a lab that is operational. Apply for funding that is open to young researchers or that requires collaboration with national or international partners. Attend interesting webinars, and never miss an opportunity to present your work to the research community.

Charu Lata
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Have you considered using publicly available data as a source for research? I suggest that you stay in your area of research and ask some new questions. In this era of genomics, the wealth of publicly available databases allows you to conduct research at home. In the medical field, medical records and big data discovery are considered an essential part of the health infrastructure and represent a valuable resource for translational research.

Ruty Mehrian-Shai
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Are you sure that spending all your time doing experiments in the lab is the best way to obtain academic achievements? In my experience, analyzing experimental results, organizing figures, and rethinking scientific ideas at regular intervals are more important to improving quality of research. Consider using this time to better understand your current results. Prepare research figures that help you tell the scientific story of your findings. Review the literature with an eye toward adjusting the aims and methods of your ongoing research. Practice communicating your work through oral and poster presentations in virtual meetings. These activities will prepare you to use your time more productively once you return to the lab.

Bo Cao
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Have you reached out to your departmental peers and administrators for direction? As a faculty member in a non-tenure-track position, I have found that it’s helpful to form a peer group to brainstorm ideas. It might also be useful to ask your school’s administration about their expectations for the current pandemic situation. Perhaps they will be flexible about your contractual obligations.

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Have you thought about how much time you have been devoting to conducting lab work, writing manuscripts, securing grants, managing students, and reading? Many young scientists are pressured to focus on publications and funding to the exclusion of other important aspects of a career in academia. This time presents an opportunity to find a balance. Consider helping the graduate students and post-doctoral students in your lab. Spending some time bonding with these researchers, professionally and personally, will help you support them. Help them contribute by asking them to think in innovative ways. Fostering new networks will help you excel in the post-COVID world.

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Explore a new field
Have you considered reading current literature outside of your primary area of expertise? Waiting for funding outcomes necessary to commence data collection is stressful, but it does provide opportunities to spend time in other ways. Reading widely enabled me to bring novel perspectives to my research areas, which led to my highest-funded and most rewarding projects. Although reading broadly will not result in immediate publications, it can help differentiate you from your peers, which will ultimately help you stay in academia long-term.

Samuel Nathan Kirshner
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Would your papers, science, and current datasets benefit from a shift in paradigm? Early in my career, I found that working with oral historians exposed me to a new way of seeing the archaeological landscape. It made my science more accessible to a general audience, brought community support for my work, and even helped pass legislation protecting archaeological remains in the countries where I recorded stories. I encourage you to keep an open mind and be flexible. Taking a step away from the lab could create an opportunity to examine your experimental paradigm, expand your literature searches to include fields outside your own, and seek different perspectives by opening dialogue with members of another field.

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Have you thought about taking a break from research? Moving away from academia for a short period helped me acquire new skills and gain momentum later in my career. I took a break during the third year of my Ph.D. program to do an internship in industry, where I started to look at problems with a new perspective. Later, I incorporated some of that experience into my thesis, my postdoc work, and even my tenure track position. I suggest that you take a break and look for “virtual” internship opportunities. You may acquire new skills that you can apply to your research later. You might even realize that there are many other options for you to apply your knowledge and skills, which will allow you to make better career decisions.

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NEXTGEN VOICES: CALL FOR QUESTIONS

Need advice? Ask your peers!

Do your COVID-19 experiences differ from this young scientist, who faces too much time and not enough funding? Are you affected by increased family duties, cancelled travel, health uncertainties, or limited career options? Are you facing unique challenges that others have overlooked? Science would like to support you by asking readers to provide peer mentoring advice. Do you have a question that you would like your peers to address? Send it to Science at the link below!

To submit, go to www.sciencemag.org/nextgen-voices-covid-19-questions

Please submit by 30 October. If your question is selected, Science will post it anonymously and ask young scientists to respond with advice to be published in a later issue.
Funding fix: Spend time
Charu Lata, Ruty Mehrian-Shai, Bo Cao, Naga Rama Kothapalli, Garima Singh, Daniel Ari Friedman, Felix Man-Him Cheung, Wagner Eduardo Richter, Samuel Nathan Kirshner, Felicia Beardsley and Xiao-Yu Wu

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