

NEWS

Spectrum Launch: Carving out vacation time as an early-career researcher

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When Oscar C. Gonzalez was in graduate school, he hardly took any time off. He regularly worked weekends, he says, and took short breaks only for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“My own anxiety about finishing grad school would make me want to check my email” constantly and respond right away, he says. “I would see an email and think, ‘I need to deal with that,’ instead of realizing that it can wait until tomorrow.”

Gonzalez, now a postdoctoral researcher in psychiatry and behavioral sciences in **Luis de Lecea**’s lab at Stanford University in California, is still not great at shutting off the ‘work side’ of his brain, but he says he has gotten better. This month, he’s taking a week-long trip to Prague with his family. And although he may read a paper or two on the plane, he says, that is the extent of the work he plans to do.

Like Gonzalez, many early-career researchers may struggle to disengage from work over the holiday season. Expectations about time off can be unclear in academia, and the need to care for model organisms or run experiments can make it difficult to take breaks.

“There’s this level of guilt if you take off too many days,” says **Katherine Byrne**, a graduate student in **Catherine Lord**’s group at the University of California, Los Angeles — even though her adviser encourages vacation time.

Early-career researchers can change that mindset — and avoid burnout — by planning ahead and setting clear boundaries, Gonzalez says.

For one thing, early-career researchers should ask their adviser or principal investigator (PI) early on about the expectations around time off, Gonzalez says. Some PIs may support lab members taking vacations at different times throughout the year as long as the work gets done, whereas others may prefer more face time in the lab, he says.

Setting boundaries during non-vacation time also helps, says Gonzalez, who now sets clear work hours for himself and avoids checking his work email in the evenings.

Teresa Del Bianco, a senior postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development at Birkbeck, University of London in the United Kingdom, has gone as far as removing the email app from her phone. “My policy is that unless it is extremely, extremely urgent, please do not contact me” outside of normal work hours, she says.

Those boundaries are not always easy to maintain. Once, while on vacation in Tuscany, Del Bianco found herself scouring Amazon for a replacement computer cable for her lab, after she received multiple text messages from colleagues asking her to troubleshoot problems with equipment. But her boundaries generally help to keep her in good mental health, she says.

Of course, even when early-career researchers feel ready to take time off, there can be logistical challenges. Researchers and clinicians working with human participants may be limited by their study participants’ schedules. For example, a scientist’s vacation plans may be derailed because many families prefer to have sleep studies conducted during holiday breaks when their child is out of school, says **Bosi Chen**, a psychology intern at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas.

But planning ahead can help make time off possible, Chen says. Many labs have teams of people who can run the experiments with enough advance notice.

Researchers who work with model organisms have their own constraints: Someone must take care of the animals or cell cultures, Gonzalez says. Once researchers have a trip planned, they should be sure to give their labmates plenty of notice — so that it’s easier to plan around the absence, he says. Gonzalez also keeps a detailed calendar so that he knows when experiments need to be run and when big deadlines are approaching. That helps him avoid planning a vacation at an inconvenient time for his lab group, he says.

Although preparing for time off can sometimes feel stressful, taking breaks is important — and possibly a biological need, Del Bianco says. She plans to travel to her home country of Italy this month to visit family and friends.

“Some birds, if you put them in a cage and force them not to migrate, they become super restless.

And they can have a heart attack because their instinct is so strong,” she says. “So I like to think of myself as being a migrating bird.”

Jobs and funds:

- The Alan B. Slifka Foundation is taking applications for a \$25,000 **research award** for work that leads to “novel treatments and improvements in the quality of life of individuals with autism, as well as novel discoveries regarding the basic science of autism.”
- **Marc Fuccillo**, associate professor of neuroscience at the University of Pennsylvania, is looking to hire a postdoctoral researcher to study chromatin and synaptic biology in autism models. The group is particularly interested in candidates with experience in acute slice electrophysiology, Fuccillo **tweeted**.
- **Mirella Dapretto** and **Shulamite Green**, professor and assistant professor, respectively, of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles, are hiring a **lab coordinator** to handle recruitment, data collection and data management for multiple MRI studies.
- Advanced neuroscience graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds are **encouraged to apply** for the Emerging Scholars Program. The deadline is 1 February.

?THRILLED to offer **#FriedmanBrainInstitute's** & **#NashNeuroscience's** "Emerging Scholars Program" for the 2nd yr! If you are an advanced **#GraduateStudent** from a underrepresented background interested in postdoc work in **#neuroscience**,APPLY NOW????**<https://t.co/rGxHvkb1yf>** **#DiverseBrains** **pic.twitter.com/OjKZ2iRvBe**

— Friedman Brain Institute (@SinaiBrain) **December 2, 2022**

- The Department of Neuroscience at the University of Texas at Dallas is hiring **three new tenure-track faculty**, tweeted **Michael D. Burton**, professor of neuroscience at the university.

Recommended resources:

- Community outreach is important, but it can also put disproportionate pressure on researchers from underrepresented communities who are expected to do the work, writes **Raul A. Ramos**, a postdoctoral researcher in neuroscience at the University of California, Berkeley, in an *eLife* **article**.
- Graduate students’ success should not be measured by the number of scientific papers they publish, writes **Brittany Trang**, a science reporting fellow for *STAT*, in an **opinion**

- article** for *Undark*. “Publication quantity isn’t a valid proxy for whether a Ph.D. student understands how to make scientific judgements.”
- Idea theft happens in academia, but having a lab with clear authorship guidelines and developing a circle of trusted colleagues can help prevent it, writes **Ijeoma Opara**, assistant professor of public health at Yale University, in a **career column** for *Nature*.
 - More early-career researchers than ever are choosing industry careers, and academia is seeing the effects of the shrinking pool of employees, according to an **article** in *STAT* last month.
 - A supportive mentor can help make a first-generation student feel like they belong in a lab, writes **Lan Nguyen Chaplin**, professor of integrated marketing communications at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in an **article** for *Science*.
 - Younger scientists are more innovative than their older peers, according to a **new study** described in *The Scientist*.
 - At least 35 percent of students from minority racial or ethnic groups reported experiencing discrimination or harassment during their graduate studies, according to a 2022 **Nature survey**.
 - Conference organizers need to address the obstacles many researchers face when trying to obtain travel visas to present their work in other countries, writes **Omid V. Ebrahimi**, a graduate student in psychology at the University of Oslo in Norway, in an **article** for *Science*.

Any suggestions for how to make this newsletter as useful as possible, or recommendations for what topic we should cover next? Send them to angie@spectrumnews.org.

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