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Staying Motivated and Connected During COVID-19

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It is the fall of 2020 and many school and career goals have changed drastically. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to canceled classes, lost or virtual internships, and a tough job market. Students are having to adjust their 2019 goals as best they can.

Change brings opportunity, even if it's not always easy to adjust, said Elizabeth Mannshardt, associate director of the US Environmental Protection Agency Information Access and Analytic Services Division. "Going forward, some things will need to be restructured; different perspectives will be valuable and thus sought out," she said. "There is such an array of options for statisticians—exploring and remaining open to opportunities and exploring along your own path is an exciting part of the journey."

The students who steer successfully through a setback can see opportunity in the midst of turmoil. "They are thinking in a versatile way about what the next year is going to look like and what the next three years are going to look like," said Mark Daniel Ward, director of The Data Mine at Purdue University.

While 2020 looks different from what most people envisioned, it's important to keep moving forward. "We can try to adapt as best we can," said Elizabeth Stuart, associate dean for education at The Johns Hopkins University.

Stay Connected

It is important to remember that the COVID-19 pandemic is global and everyone is feeling the

impact. "No one is expecting you to have it all figured out, particularly during this uncertain time," said Mannshardt. "As we work through this together, we will all learn new things about our discipline, our careers, and our friends and colleagues. Look for ways to pursue what is of interest to you and stay connected."

Talk to mentors, friends, and colleagues when seeking out new opportunities, said Margaret Betz, corporate partners senior manager of The Data Mine at Purdue University. Those relationships can lead to alternate paths. "One of our students, when they lost their internship, we were the first people that they emailed and came to our office hours to talk to, and in return, we were able to offer them alternative projects because they had developed those relationships with us," Betz said. "There are always people that can help you if you just reach out."

Existing relationships are helpful, but don't be afraid to look beyond them. "To continue growing professionally, reach out to someone you have always wanted to meet with an introductory email, commenting on a commonality on their work that may interest you," Mannshardt said. "You may make a new connection."

The statistics field, itself, can form connections across fields, especially in a time that seems to pit fields such as economics and epidemiology against each other, said Stuart. "I would love for this to be an opportunity for statisticians to help connect and show

that we're all trying to use data the best we can," she said. "Statistics kind of forms this common language that we can use to help bring fields together."

Try Something New

It's a good time to learn something new or hone existing skills using real-world data, said Betz and Ward. Take time to learn a new tool or explore a new programming language. "Right now is a good time to be brushing up on some of the skills that you can practice alone. You can read a new book on something or learn a new language," Betz said.

Since so much real-world data about the pandemic is publicly available, someone could take a deeper dive into that information. "There's some value at students taking a look," Ward said. "The worst thing that happens is that they learn ggplot a little better, they learn how to build a Shiny app, they have a thought-provoking discussion with a faculty member. ... There can be some small bits of good that come out of this devastation happening."

If spending time with pandemic data seems too intense, Stuart recommends doing something outside of one's comfort zone that still uses a statistician's knowledge about evidence, rigor, and study design to help inform family members and friends about the current state of the science surrounding COVID-19.

"When schools were first closing, I co-wrote an op-ed that came out in *USA Today* (bit.ly/32WQG80) on why parents should take that seriously and not plan lots of play dates," Stuart said. "It's been really good to find opportunities to collaborate with people and do work that feels really relevant right now."

Stay Motivated

Even though life is definitely unsettled and uncertain, try to keep some semblance of a routine. "It's important to keep some form of normalcy," Betz said. "Go to bed at a normal time—whether you want to go to bed at that time or not—get up when your alarm goes off, eat dinner, and go outside a little bit."

This is also a good time to really consider what a career in statistics or data science might look like. "For some students, it's also given them an opportunity to think deeply about what they want to do with their career and where they're going to make an impact," said Ward. "I think we've all experienced this to some extent—we don't want to take for granted how life was before this pandemic set in."

Stuart agreed that it's a good time to really consider what the future might hold. "You may have unexpected free time or an uncertain schedule right now; consider using the time to think deeply about what you want to do in life, what paths it might

Additional Resources

Professional Development

www.amstat.org/ASA/Your-Career/Professional-Development.aspx

Committee on Career Development

community.amstat.org/ccd/home

Leadership Institute

magazine.amstat.org/blog/2018/03/01/leaderinstitute

Virtual Undergraduate Career Fair

ww2.amstat.org/virtualcareerservice

take," she said. "But also be kind to yourself. Go for walks, enjoy time with your household, learn new recipes. Or binge watch TV shows! We are in a strange time, and we have to do what helps each of us get through."

Stay Open to Possibilities

Betz said it's also a good time for students to try new things and seek out new learning experiences, even if it's a new path. "I came into college wanting to be an actuary and was pretty set on that, and then the more I tried other things, the more I realized I didn't want to be an actuary," Betz said. "I think it's important to set those goals, but also to test the waters as you're going to reach them."

Mannshardt agreed and added that sometimes you can enjoy aspects of one career, even if you go in a different direction. "Starting out, I had a very clear vision of where I would end up—as a university professor—and I am now on a completely different path in government and scientific policy," she said. "I have found ways to do what I loved about the academic role I initially intended to pursue. I am able to maintain academic connections via my adjunct position, and more importantly, I have found ways to teach and work with young professionals through various roles at work and with ASA, while also continuing to do research and learn in my government role."

It's important to keep your options open and look in all directions for what comes next. "Careers are built out of a series of jobs (even within the same position or organization), professional service, key projects, and various types of milestones," Mannshardt said. What is next in yours? ■