

Radu's Rides: Oh *OUCH*, to be young again!

Contributing Editor Radu Craiu shares some concerns about the impact of the pandemic on young researchers:

By the time we start to grasp what it means to be young, the youth itself is gone. Whether it drowns in too much truth or too many compromises matters less than the realization that it is both precious in its frailty and awesome in its impetuosity. The pandemic, in its indiscriminate ability to dull spontaneity, has exacerbated youth's vulnerability and stifled its creativity. Our department has welcomed in July 2020 six new faculty members who, at the time of writing, have still not had a chance to meet their colleagues. Throughout the year, we have glimpsed our graduate students' lives momentarily on small screens, all involved parties equally frustrated to perform a task that was never meant to be solitary. Some of our graduating Master students have already said goodbye to the University (or the country) that granted their degree and that they never visited. Our PhD students are re-enacting some torture scenario from medieval times, in which one is trying to figure out the mathematical solution to a difficult problem while stuck, figuratively *and* literally, in a small chamber that no others dare visit for more than a few minutes per day, week or months. I never thought I would miss the inhalation of chalk dust this much.

And let's remind ourselves that life before Covid was already not a walk in the park for our discipline's neophytes. A couple of years ago, they were entering a community that seemed to double its size every year, whose research output was reaching ridiculous levels, in all directions and many possible senses, whose cohesion was increasingly fractured and whose benchmarks for and paths towards success were rapidly shifting.

When you enter the common room at the University of Chicago's Department of Statistics, you are met with the Wall of Fame: black and white photos of all the former Department Chairs. You may be surprised to see that Patrick Billingsley appears in his photo in a sort of pirate shirt, sporting a mysterious, yet contagious smile. In some of my darkest days as a graduate student, when things were not going as well as I would have liked, I used to go and look at that photo in an (mostly futile) attempt to take in some of the joyful devil-may-care spirit that it exudes. The contrast between reality and the photo's vibe is even more striking now than it was twenty years ago, as no discernible daredevil spirit imbues the contemporary zeitgeist. Instead,

the latter is defined by widespread risk aversion imposed by multiple hoops one needs to jump through before a career is launched, the paucity of grants that seem to discount the augmented cost of living and the size of our scientific communities, and a level of ultra-specialization that sends shivers of self-doubt down many a graduate's spine.

A year of pandemic restrictions has taken away most of the good things our young colleagues could still count on and replaced them with a nagging feeling that professional opportunities are zooming by. While senior researchers can afford to spend some of the considerable social and professional capital they have accumulated during kinder times, those entering the profession in the Covidian Era are quickly depleting theirs and face the possibility of being forgotten before they even have a chance to impress. Add to that the pressures accompanying the responsibility of caring for out-of-school young children or vulnerable elders and you may glimpse the thorny situation I am only sketching here.

Some might say that this is generally true about all disciplines, and I will agree, but with the important addendum that most other disciplines are a lot more "settled" than ours. This difference is important, because the way we treat our young colleagues will set the tone for future years in important ways. Will we develop an empathetical community, or rather opt to strengthen the survival-of-the-fittest model in which "fitness" is not necessarily defined by professional strength but rather the ability to slalom through an unprecedented set of challenges, which may not be correlated with level of expertise or intellectual abilities? This is an important test for all of us who are at a more advanced career stage, for university leaders, and for professional organizations such as IMS.

The Institute sponsors several journals and conferences. While the main criteria for funding must always be the importance of the topic and the quality of the output, more attention can be given to ensure that visibility is not showered only on those who already have it. We can all repair some of the fractures produced by the last year, by letting our young colleagues take on that invitation to speak, by nominating them for an honour, by including them in a team grant, or by adding them to promising research projects for which they have the necessary training. Sometimes, bigger effects come from the simplest gestures: the ability to listen and commiserate, the willingness to share our own failures and setbacks, rather than to brag about accomplishments and honours. We may be tempted to think that we are all swimming in the same murky puddle, but it is worth remembering that some are having a harder time seeing the light.

Consider nominating a younger colleague for the IMS Peter Hall Early Career Prize or the Tweedie New Researcher Award, or encourage them to apply for an IMS Travel Award or the Lawrence D. Brown PhD Student Award.
Deadlines & requirements: <https://imstat.org/ims-awards/>