Embracing the Researcher’s Lifestyle

Adjusting to the researcher’s lifestyle may be a large change for some of you this summer. Many of you have never worked full time as a researcher, and you may not be accustomed to facing the challenges and demands of research during the warm summer months previously filled with swimming, bonfires, and catching fireflies. But, never fear! This summer can be just as exciting and fun as you tackle new obstacles while balancing the time you spend on research with social activities and exploring Columbus.

As you begin your journey as a full-time researcher, however, keep the following tips in mind to make the transition into the workplace a smooth one and to reap lifelong benefits from your experience:

Tip #1: Be confident in your ability to learn and think critically
At this stage in the game, you are fully committed to learning through this research experience. One of the reasons we all love research so much is the unknown discoveries that exist just waiting to be uncovered—who knows what you’ll know at the conclusion of the summer! Recognize that not only have you learned a tremendous amount in getting to your current position, but you likely know more than you realize. There is a reason your colleagues are relying on you more—they are gaining confidence in your work. You have the ability to hypothesize, understand, and draw inferences—be confident in your commitment to learning!

Tip #2: Don’t be afraid to ask questions
All research begins with asking questions—before designing your methods or performing certain lab techniques, all research begins with and is driven by a question. With that in mind, ask as many questions as you can over the summer. This experience will become more rich and worthwhile if you step out of your comfort zone to ask for clarification when you don’t understand something. The better you understand a technique or a concept, the better you’ll understand the greater purpose of the work you’re doing!

Tip #3: Change your view of null results
Many of you are probably aware that research rarely goes as planned and that curveballs fly at you from every direction during the process. Trust me, you are not alone in the process or in the feeling of despair that often accompanies it. For example, after performing my first independent experiment, which failed miserably, the PI that I worked with as an undergraduate responded simply, “Welcome to science.” Although this statement could be disheartening, it highlights how often researchers find null results. Just because you did not find what you were expecting, however, does not mean your efforts were in vain! Even null results can help the field advance and can point you in the right direction for future research.

Tip #4: Develop a relationship with your mentor
Use this summer to build a close relationship with your faculty mentor as you grow as a researcher. They have been down this path and can provide much insight and advice. Try to meet regularly with them to talk about what you’ve learned and to receive feedback about your project(s) thus far. The faculty mentor with whom you are working may very likely become one of your “letter of recommendation writers” for graduate/professional school or for going into the workforce, and the better they know you, the stronger their letter of support will be!

Tip #5: Reflect on your work and on yourself
You will likely be quite busy this summer, but it’s very important to take time out of the day to reflect on the work you are doing. Like Dr. Hernandez discussed in the Guidelines to Keeping a God Lab Notebook event, try to take time each day to process your progress for that day and check your understanding. Write down questions that may come up and summarize what you learned. During this reflection time, you’ll often come up with new research questions or discover an explanation you may have overlooked!

My strongest advice for this summer is to take time to reflect on you. How has this experience impacted your career aspirations, your plans for next year, your worldview, your idea about what is important in life? I cannot stress enough how important self-reflection is, as it’s something that I often struggle to do. It is very easy to become wrapped up in activities and wrapped up in other people’s visions for your future. Be sure to check in with yourself to make certain you are progressing toward your ideal future.

Tip #6: Balance work and play

Although this summer will be lots of work, it can still be fun! Columbus is alive in the summer with festivals, concerts, great eats, and outdoor activities. Try to take advantage of living in this awesome city while you can! For area events, be sure to check out the final section of each weekly email that lists local events as well as links to much more extensive lists. My two favorites are probably Experience Columbus and Underground Columbus. Grab a friend from SURI, and don’t forget to use #SURI2016 and #SURiousAboutResearch to post pictures from your adventures!

I hope you find these tips helpful, and stay tuned for next week’s Topic of the Week!

All the best,

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