For junior investigators starting their independent careers, the challenges of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic extend beyond lost time and are career threatening. Without intervention, academic science could lose a generation of talent.
funding for junior investigators is critical to recovering from the pandemic and ensuring that the investments already made in junior faculty are not lost.

Junior faculty also face lost time and momentum. Many universities responded to the pandemic with rapid assurances of tenure extensions. These extensions can be helpful, but they are insufficient to fully address the harms of the pandemic and have drawbacks for faculty who take them. Delaying tenure carries personal financial impacts and prolongs the stress of the precarious tenure track. Extensions to the tenure clock are not always interpreted equitably; for example, fathers’ careers benefit from taking a tenure extension while mothers’ do not [3]. Institutions will need to work carefully to ensure that tenure extensions are equitable to all faculty that take them. A helpful alternative or addition to tenure extensions would be to give junior faculty a semester or year of teaching and service release, allowing them to focus exclusively on restarting their research program.

As the COVID-19 pandemic fades into memory, it is essential that the senior scientists making career-defining decisions on hiring, tenure, and funding for junior academics do not forget the impact the pandemic has had. The financial and logistical effects of the pandemic should be documented as much as is possible, in annual reviews and mid-tenure checkpoints. It is important that institutional tenure and promotion committees develop holistic and transparent review guidelines for evaluating pandemic-affected academics and that they carefully monitor success rates of attaining tenure for this cohort. We recommend that tenure dossiers should include a statement from the candidate and their chair documenting the specific effects of the pandemic on their lab and that this document be seriously discussed as part of deliberations on each case.

COVID-19 has shifted the career trajectories of this generation of early career academics. Decisions about hiring, funding, tenure, and promotion should be made based on how well an individual is doing on this new trajectory, not whether they have been able to claw their way back to the pre-COVID standard. Hiring and tenure committees must be prepared to adjust their expectations and make their evaluations based on what candidates have achieved with the time and resources available to them. Importantly, “adjusted expectations” do not mean “lowered expectations.” This generation of early career academics are surviving an unprecedented disaster while maintaining research programs, adapting their pedagogy to teaching online, and preserving safety of lab members and their families. Juggling these responsibilities demonstrates ingenuity, tenacity, hard work, and empathic leadership. Junior academics have done this with limited resources while in a career phase of immense stress, uncertainty, and pressure. To persist and succeed despite the pandemic demonstrates that junior faculty are valuable members of their institutions and scientific community. Tenure committees must recognize that junior academics did not spend the pandemic doing less work, but doing different, equally important work. Junior faculty represent the future of our fields, but the impacts of the pandemic have imperiled their career progression. It will take significant efforts from the scientific community to ensure that this generation of scientists is not a casualty of the pandemic.

References

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