Introducing ‘Letters to Young Scientists,’ a new column from Science Careers

Pursuing a scientific career can be a daunting journey. Yet many of us are not taught how to navigate the tasks and challenges—giving a high-quality presentation, surviving the academic job market, and becoming a mentor, to name just a few—as part of our standard scientific training. And even the best mentor can’t provide advice to everyone or cover everything when it comes to succeeding in science and academia. So where can young scientists go for practical, reliable advice?
In a tradition that dates back nearly a century, prominent scientists used to dispatch "letters" of advice and guidance to the next generation. In 1936, Nobel laureate Ivan Pavlov offered kernels of wisdom in a letter in *Science*. More than 80 years later, the letter from the famed physiologist remains as fresh and relevant as his research on conditioning. Countless other scientists have written similar dispatches. The list includes biologist E.O. Wilson's 2013 book *Letters to a Young Scientist* and psychologist John Cacioppo's “*A Letter to Young Scientists*.” Building on this rich history, we wanted to start our own ongoing conversation with young scientists with a new column: Letters to Young Scientists.

We are five social science professors with diverse backgrounds and experiences, both scientific and personal, which will help us deliver useful, candid advice to scientists at all career stages, from research assistants dipping their toes into the lab for the very first time to senior scientists looking to stay abreast of trends in mentoring, and point to debates where they exist. Some of us have won awards and conducted workshops on these topics or have written about mentoring issues in the popular press. Others have faced our own mentoring challenges and want to share what we have learned.

As a group, we can offer a breadth of expertise to handle just about any topic or question that comes our way. Just as it's advisable to seek out mentors in addition to your principal investigator (PI), we aim to offer a variety of perspectives and make sure that each topic is covered by the individual or group best suited to discuss it. While we are all academics—and thus most familiar with the pressing issues inside the walls of academia—we aim to offer support and resources for those interested in nonacademic career paths as well.

In alphabetical order, here is a bit about each of us:

**William Cunningham** is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada, where he directs a lab investigating emotion and self-perception. He loves outliers and proving hypotheses wrong. As a result, he has had to change research directions and theoretical positions more than once.

**June Gruber** is an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where she directs a lab that studies happiness, emotions, and mental illness. As an academic mother of two young boys, she frequently thinks about strategies to achieve work-life balance and support career advancement for women in the sciences.

**Neil Lewis, Jr.** is an assistant professor of communication and social behavior at Cornell University, where he directs a lab that studies motivation and goal pursuit. He is a first-generation college graduate who went directly from being a graduate student at the University of Michigan to a PI, and he frequently thinks about strategies to broaden access to those who are traditionally underrepresented in the sciences.
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Leah Somerville is an associate professor of psychology at Harvard University, where she heads a research lab filled with scientists ranging from high school students to postdoctoral fellows. She has a special interest in mentoring and helping individuals who have not taken the “straight and narrow path” overcome the resulting barriers to career advancement they may face.

Jay Van Bavel is an associate professor of psychology and neural sciences at New York University in New York City, where his lab examines how group identities shape the mind and brain. He was a first-generation college graduate who did not realize that universities conducted research until a few months before his graduation.

We have seen young scientists’ thirst for advice firsthand. When Jay recently shared some informal advice about giving a research talk written by June, it garnered more than 40,000 views on Twitter within a week. When Jay shared some slides to demystify the academic job market from a workshop that he and Neil conducted, it was also quickly consumed by more than 5000 people.

We will work to address this need by offering concrete and tangible take-home lessons and accompanying resources. To kick things off, later this week we will share three key reminders to help grad students not merely survive—but thrive. Next month, we will cover 10 tips for applying to grad school. Beyond that, the column will target a range of issues that span the academic career trajectory from undergraduate to starting one’s own lab.

We will also have a Twitter feed—@SciCareersLTYS—to follow the latest news on mentoring advice and an email account—letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org—so that you can send us your questions and ideas for future columns. This will allow for open discourse as well as disagreement. If you have specific topics you’d like us to discuss, please let us know, as we hope for a dynamic exchange with our readers. Welcome!

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