

Were There Ever “Good Old Days” for Academic Research?

Author

Enago Academy

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The Only Constant is Change

Any young scientist struggling with the [competitive challenges of modern research](#) can be forgiven for wondering if the “old days” of academic research were less competitive, more collaborative, more collegial, and less dependent on reams and reams of paperwork.

Venting with colleagues about how much stuff gets in the way of research today may indeed portray those old days as “good,” but if you talk to older researchers, you would be surprised to know that they were probably just as blessed with aggravations and obstacles. Probably, they looked back to their “old days” too, in search of a better time with less stuff to get in the way of real work!

No Shortage of Frustrations

Research is an industry with a high propensity for “burn-out.” High-performance expectations, equally high financial obligations, and long stress-filled work hours can, and do, take their toll over time.

After entering an industry to “put yourself out of a job” by finding a treatment, or preferably a cure, the slow grinding effect of administrative bureaucracy, battles over funding, and the constant horse-trading to improve your chances of advancement or even tenure, can take you to a point where you forget why you got into the field in the first place.

This is prime territory for rose-colored glasses to filter-out all of the problems from a couple of decades ago and to imagine how much better off your colleagues must have been back then.

Similar But Different

If you're tired of scraping around for budget dollars, think back to the early days of computing when professors had to fight for hours of time on those computers, or even further back to the punch card days when Machiavellian strategies to hide cards and tapes were developed to sabotage one project in favor of another. Staff was purloined and research topics were "re-assigned," often without your permission.

In other words, there were no limitless bags of cash to pay for anything and everything, and there were no pressure-free work environments where you could work on what you wanted when you wanted (unless you moved in the same circles as Einstein).

Research may not have been so corporate back then, but there were still clear performance expectations and problems with [plagiarism and scientific misconduct](#).

The New Generation Has to Keep Improving

For all the terrible things that challenge academic research today, we should remember that there are still less terrible things than there were back in those "old days." The dominance of the financially endowed Ivy League schools has been broken, and the women who struggled against sexism and the old-boy network back then now have counterparts with more (but still not equal) opportunities in science today.

Technology allows us to do more than we could have ever imagined back then, but a couple of decades from now, I have no doubt that we'll be doing stuff we're incapable of imagining now.

There is always a place for nostalgia, and as George Santayana said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." However, the challenges and frustrations of today's research are here as an invitation to the young researchers of today to improve upon them, just as their predecessors did.

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