How to Work with your Mentor

Thomas Weiser MD MPH
Mentor:

• n. An experienced and trusted adviser; a trusted counselor or guide
• v. Advise or train

“someone of advanced rank or experience who guides, teaches, and develops a novice” = i.e. dyadic, hierarchical

From Mentōr, the name of the adviser of the young Telemachus in Homer’s Odyssey.
Benefits of Mentorship

• Personal Development and Career Guidance:
  – Career enhancement
  – Promotion
  – Improved confidence in academic roles and skills

• Specialty Choice, Academic Career Choice, Retention
  – Importance of mentorship more valued in academic medicine
  – Equivocal whether mentorship encourages an academic career
  – Possibly improved retention in academics

• Research Development and Productivity
  – Increased self-confidence
  – Support and resources for research activities
  – More allocation to research activities, more productive (publications and grants)
  – Lack of mentorship noted as a barrier to completing scholarly projects
  – Those mentored more likely to provide mentorship to others

Sambunjak, JAMA, 2006
Benefits of Mentorship

• Gender Differences
  – Men more likely to describe positive mentoring relationship
  – OB/Gyn residents less likely to have a mentor
  – Women report lack of a mentor as barrier to promotion
  – Most mentors were white males, although women more likely to have female mentors
  – In one study, more women than men reported that their mentor used their work to advance their own career rather than the mentee

Sambunjak, JAMA, 2006
How does Academic Surgery do?

- 70% of academic surgical departments pair faculty with mentors
- 82% offer no official training
- Over half had no formal requirement regarding timing, type of interaction, proof of meeting; 68% did not officially recognize the mentorship work financially or academically
Mentor-Mentee Relationship: Qualitative study of 21 mentees and 7 mentors who obtained academic career support funding

• Experience with mentorship:
  – Vital to career success
  – 9 reported difficulties with mentorship, lack of mentorship, research stolen by mentor, perceived competition by mentor
  – Female mentees expressed greater challenges in finding mentors

• Self-identified mentor vs assigned mentor
  – Relationship was more forced, artificial when assigned

• Roles of mentor
  – Grant review
  – Connections/collaboration with other researchers
  – Manuscript preparation
  – Networking
  – Career guidance
  – Navigating bureaucracy/difficult situations
  – Model good mentorship

Straus, Acad Med, 2009
Mentor-Mentee Relationship: Qualitative study of 21 mentees and 7 mentors who obtained academic career support funding

• Characteristics of good mentoring relationship:
  – Seniority, approachability, accessibility, altruism, understanding, patience, honesty
  – Ensure that mentee benefits
  – Mutual respect, open communication
  – Confidentiality
  – Clear Expectations
  – Commitment from mentee, mentee as facilitator
  – Regular contact

• Barriers to mentorship
  – Time constraints
  – Lack of academic recognition, mentorship as a “hobby”
  – Lack of financial incentives (reported by mentees only!)
  – Lack of skills sets for mentoring – inability to understand/appreciate mentee’s requirements
  – Lack of available mentors

• Mentorship improvement strategies
  – Identify mentors across institutions, separate research vs academic mentor
  – Funding to aid the relationship
  – Training for mentors

Straus, Acad Med, 2009
Making the Most of your Mentor

• Prepare yourself – what are your goals, values, motivations
  – Personal preferences – gender, race, personality, emotional needs, congruence, work habits
  – Domains to consider – personal, professional development, skills development, academic guidance, research
• Find a mentor – ask around, find multiple people
• Cultivate the relationship – relationship structure, responsibilities, mutual expectations, concrete measures of progress and success
• Separation – plan for the evolution of the relationship, anticipate the transition

Zerzan, Acad Med, 2009
Final Thoughts

• Develop personal metrics for success/progress
• One cannot really “assign” a mentor
• Relationships are cultivated over time
• Relationships change over time
• Open communication that builds in a discussion of conflicts/concerns helps facilitate difficult conversations
Suggested Reading:


