

FROM THE REGIONS

“A Brain to Pick, An Ear to Listen, and a Push in the Right Direction”: A Student’s Perspective On Building A Mentoring Relationship

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In the California/Hawaii region one of our primary goals of the last 18 months has been to reach out to residents and students to show them the range of possibilities in pursuing a generalist career. Our efforts started with the inclusion of more trainees on our leadership council. We’ve learned that one of their biggest concerns is how to create and maintain successful career mentoring relationships. Medical students especially have reported varied experiences with career mentoring, stating that this is often an overlooked part of their curriculum. To address these needs, we are making mentorship a central focus of our regional meeting this year. Our program will include a plenary panel session on career mentoring as well as a trainee breakout session to help students find mentors who fit their needs. This article by Puja Kohli (UC San Francisco) and Ryan Laponis (UC Davis), the medical student representatives to the California/Hawaii Regional Leadership Council, presents a medical student’s perspective on how faculty can help facilitate successful mentoring relationships with students.

— Jeff Kohlwes, MD, MPH, President, California/Hawaii Region

A recent review of mentorship in Internal Medicine defined a mentor as “an active partner in an ongoing relationship who helps a mentee maximize potential and reach personal and professional goals.” Research in law, business, nursing, and medicine has shown that mentorship leads to higher levels of career satisfaction and confidence, especially if it begins early in a person’s career. Whether a student is looking for a mentor “to inspire, to support, and to invest” or for a role model with desirable clinical skills, a mentor provides “a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.” Unfortunately, shyness and lack of focus are often barriers to students in pursuit of this type of relationship. In this article, we use a three-domain model to describe a medical student’s perspective on the challenges to initiating and maintaining a productive longitudinal mentoring relationship. Having both struggled with and benefited from mentorship, we offer advice on how faculty can achieve meaningful mentoring relationships with students.

Statement of Purpose

A student must define specific goals for the mentoring relationship. Initially, students need positive reinforcement since articulating these goals may be hindered by fear

of meeting a senior role model or “saying the wrong thing.” To alleviate student anxiety, attend to non-verbal communication. Minimizing physical barriers, such as desks or tables; focusing your attention on the student; and maintaining an open posture will help demonstrate your interest and create a safe space for communication for students who feel intimidated by the difference in status. When eliciting the student’s goals for the relationship, an open-ended approach may be more effective: “What goals could this relationship help you reach, now and in the future?” If goals are overly broad, help the student conceptualize: Are the goals professional (career development, networking), academic (choosing electives, research), personal (balancing career and family), or global (integration of professional and personal goals, long-term planning)? Indeed, the importance of helping students verbalize their goals has been demonstrated by a 1979 *Harvard Business Review* study that found that trainees who provided guidance about their needs to mentors were more likely to develop a satisfying mentoring relationship.

Elicitation of commitment and qualification

After the student generates a statement of purpose, the mentor needs to demonstrate an understanding of the goal(s)

and provide a commitment to their achievement over time. Emphasis on the importance of the on-going nature of the relationship is critical to gaining trust. Once a mutual commitment has been established, share your optimism about achieving the goal(s). Recognize that such commitment will likely include the provision of networking opportunities for the student with other potential mentors who may be better suited to help achieve some of the goals. This will in fact enhance student confidence in your role as mentor and further deepen trust.

Shared understanding

Every mentoring relationship is unique. The relationship requires active contributions from both sides that are tailored to the evolving goals. On one hand, it is the active provision of guidance that distinguishes mentors from being mere role models or evaluators. On the other hand, it is often the initiative of the mentee that maintains the relationship throughout the process of professional development. As such, the relationship is a fluid process. Recognition of communication and working styles at the beginning can help the mentor and the mentee communicate productively. Consider asking your mentee about past

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just repeating the main finding. Keep the conclusion focused on the implications of the results presented in the abstract.

Submitting the abstract. First, read and follow the submission instructions. Second, start and finish early. Third, pick both a primary and secondary category (if appropriate) to describe your abstract (described in detail on the SGIM website). This will help us steer your abstract to the appropriate review committee.

Writing the Abstract: Don'ts

Don't submit an abstract without someone else reviewing it first. No matter how smart, senior, or polished you are, your abstract will always be better after one or more cycles of pre-submission peer review. To paraphrase the author James Michener, "There are no good writers, only good re-writers."

Avoid "Last Minute Abstract Submission Stress Disorder." The abstract deadline is January 8, 2007, at midnight PST, but the online submission process opens right around Thanksgiving. Although it is human nature to wait until the last minute, save money (and stress) by submitting by December 21—the submission fee goes up on December 22. Plan sufficient time to write, proofread, and submit your abstract before the deadline. Remember, the closer to the deadline, the harder to get technical assistance and the slower the COS website will be.

Avoid CIATSSs (Contrived Idiosyncratic Abbreviations To Save Space). A few standard abbreviations are fine, assuming you spell them out the first time. However, people sometimes try to sneak under the character limit with "acronymagaly"—excessive use of acronyms. This may fool the computer counting characters, but it will make reading your abstract harder for human reviewers. Anything you can do to make your abstract "easy on the eyes," simple, and straightforward will be to your advantage.

Don't issue "promissory notes." Do not say "results will be forthcoming" or "discussed more fully in..."

Don't "slice the salami." Avoid splitting the main findings into multiple skinny abstracts short on substance if the results are better described in one abstract. Most times a "full sandwich" will be better satisfy the reviewers "hunger" and increase the chance of a highly rated abstract.

Additional Tips

Who should submit? Everyone. The national meeting should be a platform for our members' best work, regardless of seniority. While SGIM has a strong tradition in special sessions that feature the outstanding work of trainees and junior faculty, we encourage all SGIM members to submit their work including mid- and senior-level faculty.

Submit your abstract to your regional

SGIM meeting. Regional meetings are a great opportunity to disseminate your work and gain experience with oral and poster presentations, especially for trainees and junior faculty. You can submit and present the identical abstract at a regional and national SGIM meeting.

What about other national meetings? Can generalist researchers working in a particular specialty present their findings at SGIM and at a subspecialty society meeting? The answer is, "It depends, but probably yes." First carefully check the rules governing abstract submissions for both organizations. The SGIM eligibility policy states that an abstract not be submitted if it has already been published or accepted for publication either in article or abstract form prior to the abstract submission deadline.

Finally, the book *Publishing and Presenting Clinical Research* by SGIM member Warren S. Browner (2nd Edition, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006) is a great resource.

We look forward to your submissions. Thank you in advance to all of our Abstract Committee reviewer volunteers. For more information about the 2008 SGIM Annual Meeting, go to www.sgim.org/am08.

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To provide comments or feedback about Annual Meeting Preview, please contact Rachel Murkofskey at rmurk@hawaii.rr.com.

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experiences: "I am excited about making this a successful experience. What do you feel has made your mentoring relationships successful in the past?" Be sure to share your own experiences as well. If you also function as an evaluator or supervisor, openly discuss this dual role to clarify expectations. Consider offering to remove yourself from the evaluator role, to ease the establishment of a candid mentoring relationship. With this shared knowledge and understanding, mutually generate an approach to communication and a commitment to work

together. Finally, leave open the possibility to revisit your communication and working styles in the future.

Moving Forward

With this three-domain approach, we hope mentors will feel more comfortable in helping empower students to initiate relationships and actively fine-tune them to achieve their goals. For a further discussion of the mentee's perspective, we recommend a recent publication (Lee et al. Nature's Guide for Mentors. *Nature* 2007; 447:791-7.) Regardless of the approach,

evolution of the relationship should be symbiotic, with each party contributing to the dialogue and both receiving satisfaction out of the growth. A famous author once said, "Mentors and [mentees] are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of [mentoring's] great rewards is the daily chance it gives [everyone] to get back on the dance floor."

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Please send any comments, suggestions, or ideas for From the Regions to Keith vom Eigen at vomeigen@adp.uchc.edu