

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Making an IMMPACT with Peer Mentoring in GIM

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Many GIM faculty members are in a unique position in academics as they strive to build careers as clinician educators. Educational scholarship opportunities can, at times, be less easily identified and pursued than more traditional scholarly work in basic science or clinical research. Mentoring has a long tradition in supporting the scholarship needed to build and advance careers in academics; having access to high quality mentorship is consistently cited as a critical factor in developing a career.¹ Peer mentoring has been proven to be an effective and efficient means of providing mentorship to clinician educators, especially in regards to their scholarly productivity.^{2,3}

Five years ago, a group of peers and I within our growing division decided to seek solutions to a perceived lack of available mentors in our chosen career paths. At the time, there were no formal mentoring programs within the division, the department, or the institution. At the University of Nebraska Medical Center, we are free from the traditional “up or out” promotion and tenure system; this relieves a great deal of pressure. However, when scholarly efforts compete for time with immediately pressing clinical and educational demands, many faculty find navigating these priorities difficult. Our group shared a desire to actively grow and shape our careers with a focus on educational scholarship, and sought to build our skills in doing so.

All were junior faculty in traditional clinician-educator roles, nearly all with little “protected time” for scholarly activity. Our goal, as outlined in our charter, developed over the first few meetings: *To facilitate the professional growth and devel-*

opment of early-career GIM Clinician-Educator faculty who have an interest in educational research and application of educational principles. We also chose a name to reflect the path we set out upon together: Internal Medicine Mentoring Peers in an Academic Career Track, or IMM-PACT. Along the way, we have learned a number of key lessons that have sustained and strengthened our group. I hope that sharing our experiences will help those seeking to develop or grow their own groups.

First, we built our group around a *commonality*; in our case, a shared interest in educational research and a focus on scholarly productivity. However, a group could be built around any affinity: early career faculty, research faculty, late career faculty considering transition to retirement, gender—any alliance will aid in the group’s formation and cohesion. The shared aspect serves as the starting point for building bonds which will (hopefully) naturally occur over time.

At our first meetings, we were explicit in establishing our *common goals*, and dedicated a few meetings to write and revise a charter with the intent to revisit the charter periodically (annually has so far worked well for us). What is the purpose of your group? How long do you plan to keep the group together? It may work well to ask members to commit to a peer-mentoring group for only one year; helping them avoid an open-ended commitment may increase their willingness to participate in something new.

Committing to frequent meetings

especially early in the group’s development was a key strategy for IMM-

PACT. This helped the group build momentum and a sense of cohesion. Capitalize on the excitement generated by creating something new. Use the first 2-3 meetings to draw up and revise the group’s charter until all agree. Taking time to get the charter right will help ensure that all members are traveling in the same direction. This avoids miscommunication and can head off disappointment or frustration by ensuring that all members took part in directing the group’s chosen path.

An important aspect of our peer group has been the explicit plan not to involve direct supervisors/leaders. I recommend inviting these leaders only if you have questions they are best suited to answer and if the group would like to build a specific discussion with the leader present. Keeping the group comprised of peers allows for discussion that could be stunted by the presence of even the most considerate and open-minded leaders. However, ensuring that your leadership is aware of the group is important; even moral support in the form of positive and reinforcing language when speaking of the group or to its members can be very helpful. Our group members are incredibly grateful for the active support and championing from our division leadership.

I often characterize IMMPACT as “*organized but not formal*”—it is important to set and keep to agendas. Seek agenda items routinely from the membership to maintain group input. Circulate a signup sheet for members to choose a date to bring work of their choice for the group to discuss and review. However, providing a time/space for a “breather” from routine duties is potentially a

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valuable aspect of the group's function. Our meetings are during lunch time and members are welcome to bring food, etc.

Foster interpersonal relationships.

As the group's chairperson, I make an effort to publicly congratulate members on successes both personal and professional. Allowing a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for members to chat will build trust and friendship, important aspects of group mentoring. I always watch for opportunities to highlight the work of members at IMMPACT meetings and beyond.

What is the optimal size for a peer-mentoring group? Too small of a group may be problematic if not all members may be able to attend on a routine basis. Conversely, having too large a group prevents members from getting to know each other well. An appropriate goal based on our experience would be not less than 8, not greater than 12-15 members.

Maintaining a group for five years has enabled us to see those aspects that contribute to ongoing success. Ensure one meeting per year is set aside for review of the group's charter and for reflection and feedback. Is the group functioning well? Do changes need to be made to membership—are there new colleagues you would like to invite? What has worked best in the group, and how can you build from that success?

Preserve the group's time as a priority and members will respect it as such. I make a concerted effort to avoid unnecessary or last minute cancellations. However, with the group's support, I do set aside a meeting occasionally for celebra-

tions. I order a cake & we have a casual gathering instead of a business meeting each year at the "anniversary" of the group's formation, as a thanks and celebration of the members' commitment and hard work. The group also periodically seeks out experts to join us as guest speakers; we have one library colleague who has been such a well-regarded speaker she has joined us multiple times. Building networks and connections in this way is valuable for academicians in any field.

Discourage "venting sessions." Adhering to a set agenda will help this. Having the group of peers provides all members with trusted colleagues for private discussions; encourages a focused effort in the meetings on the agenda and productivity; and makes an effort to keep discussion optimistic and positive, as appropriate. The group's chairperson serves an important role in setting the tone—avoid complaining in this environment as it can catch like wildfire and derail the meeting.

As mentioned, the size of a peer-mentoring group is an important aspect of the group dynamic. Our group at UNMC has seen such growth and success we have had to create a second-generation group! We have chosen to revel in our advancing age and frequently crack jokes about "JV IMMPACT" or "Freshman IMMPACT" taking on its own charter.

Building and maintaining a group of peers who not only shares my academic interests but also supports one another in our efforts is one of the most meaningful accomplishments of my career. My colleagues share my enthusiasm, as they have noted:

"I've presented things that have come out of this group multiple times—I can't imagine that they would have happened otherwise."

"This group is new and different and I think in a lot of ways more helpful to young faculty, because it's approachable."

"What we've done with the peer mentoring is be able to pull ourselves up, advance each others' careers through mutual accountability, through a shared sense of our collective wellbeing."

I hope that our successful strategies can serve as a framework for faculty seeking to IMMPACT their own careers, using the support and guidance of the wonderful peers many of us have in GIM.

References

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