

Young GI angle: Choosing a mentor/mentee

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Many young doctors look at established academic physicians with a sense of awe and may not believe themselves able to leave an impression on their field of medicine. Our desire to both care for patients and build a lasting reputation by publishing impactful literature can feel like an insurmountable hurdle on the path to independent practice. Although the young physician may feel as if they need to navigate this path alone, a thoughtful and devoted mentor can help guide the way and support them during the process and beyond.

The initial search

A mentor is often someone who has achieved what you hope to emulate. This person will take many forms and may change over time. Early on, the mentor is often someone at your local institution who may have a research project in an area that interests you. For me, once I arrived at my gastroenterology fellowship program, I spoke with senior fellows and junior faculty to assess a knowledgeable and understanding mentor in the field of advanced endoscopy. I was fortunate to be at an institution with one of the world's most distinguished endoscopists, Dr Todd Baron. I wanted to ensure my interests lined up with his expertise and began by performing a literature search on pubmed.gov. By reading some of his most-cited publications, I was able to confirm my time would be well spent. You can glean from conversations with others at your institution whether the person is approachable and easy to work with—two important characteristics when selecting an early mentor.

Approaching a potential mentor

Once a potential mentor has been identified, contact is the next step. As the saying goes, “you only get to make a first impression once,” thus the approach is crucial. An email can serve this purpose, and should contain your clinical interests, research training (if any) and potential projects. Sending your curriculum vitae in the initial email is often unnecessary. It is important to recognize that mentoring a trainee often creates more work for the mentor, so clearly describing the value you can add to their research is critical. Even if

you have little experience, chart review and data extraction can save a busy clinician hours of time that could be better spent elsewhere.

Identify projects

After making the initial contact with your potential mentor, you should set up a time to meet in person to discuss a first project. This project should be within your mentor's field and utilize your skillset. This project should include attainable goals, such as abstract submission with subsequent poster or presentation creation for Digestive Disease Week or another national conference. Early success on a project will encourage continued work and help to deepen the relationship. After some early success, you will have demonstrated your ability to follow through on the projects that you undertake. This will in turn allow your mentor to entrust you with larger or higher-impact projects.

Keeping your mentor accountable

Your mentor is meant to not only teach you how to collect data and write a manuscript, but also to promote your career development within the field. When a position becomes available for a fellow to serve on a societal or departmental committee, the mentor should think of your nomination first and foremost. This may take some reminding or prompting, but is often less onerous than it seems. When you receive a job offer, your mentor should be able to provide unbiased advice regarding your approach to the position. Untangling their interests from yours is not always easy, but if you have developed a relationship built on mutual respect, they will always be in your corner.

Building a mutually beneficial relationship

Although you have much to gain from your mentor, it should not be a one-sided exchange. Beyond helping them with data collection, analysis, and manuscript drafting, you will slowly become a content expert through their guidance. With this new knowledge base, you will begin to form your own research questions. You will also develop a unique skillset of your own that is complementary to your mentor's. This can

come from taking classes in epidemiology or cost analysis, but can also come from attending seminars and hands-on courses on new procedural techniques. It is the overlap of your unique skillsets that will help to cement your professional relationship and provide a symbiotic two-way exchange of information.

The role for multiple mentors

Although one mentor can shape your life in significant ways, helping to determine your early career interests and shaping job prospects, it is important to recognize that one person cannot provide mentorship in all aspects of your life. In addition to your primary mentor, you may need additional mentors that can help in areas such as work-life balance and education. You may also need a mentor for such things as special side projects such as device development or animal studies. Recognition of each mentor's abilities and limitations when seeking to fulfill your needs and ambitions in life is paramount. In most situations, the best approach is to have one primary mentor to prevent diverging too far from the primary goals. Although it can be productive in select situations, mentees should avoid over-engaging in projects with secondary mentors as this practice often detracts from the overall plan.

Senior perspective: Todd H Baron

Mentoring is often not only rewarding from a personal perspective but also from an academic one. A hard-working and productive mentee can be a great ally, especially for the academic clinician who may not have funding and must rely on trainees for productivity due to their busy clinical schedules. My clinical research mentor, Dr Joel Richter, provided me with a foundation, and much of what is expressed here is a result of that relationship.

The mentor has many responsibilities to the mentee and a good mentor understands the best outcome is a "win-win" situation where both sides derive benefit. The relationship cannot be one-sided in that the mentor derives more benefit than the mentee. Indeed, often the main reason to act as a mentor is to benefit the mentee.

First and foremost, the mentor must provide the mentee with a project they know the mentee can complete, in a timeframe acceptable to the mentee. I have seen relationships sour when the mentee is given something that has little or no chance to see the light of day and leads to lost time and disappointment. In my opinion, the ultimate goal for data-driven manuscripts and videos is not the generation of an abstract but a complete, published manuscript in the best and most

appropriate journal for the topic. Second, the mentor needs to provide adequate oversight to allow completion of the project. As mentioned above, this requires a time commitment on the mentors' part. Care must be taken by the mentor to avoid micromanagement as this can stifle the growth of the mentee. After initially becoming familiar with the mentee, a meeting to provide an overview and plan the project is helpful. At this time the mentor explains the rationale behind the project, the recommended approach to completion, expectations for completion, and, perhaps most importantly, what the authorship will look like. As was done for me as a mentee, I believe the mentee should receive first authorship if they do the bulk of the work, including data collection and drafting of the manuscript. However, the mentor should always be the corresponding author. This provides the greatest benefit to the mentee. No matter how authorship is done, it is best for all parties that the author order is set a priori so that surprises and disappointments do not come later.

A reasonable deadline for project completion should be given early, often even at the first meeting. Regular, scheduled meetings are needed to ensure the project is moving forward towards completion by a date when both parties are satisfied. I believe in an "open-door" policy such that the mentee can contact me with questions whenever needed during the project.

The final step for completion of the project is the manuscript. This often requires a fair amount of time commitment for the mentor. In the old days I would give a type-written paper manuscript to my mentor and he would hand it back to me with red marks and sit down with me to discuss the reasoning behind the edits. These days this process is accomplished electronically with edits provided using the track changes function of a computer program (e.g., Microsoft Word). Although the exchange can also be done completely electronically, I prefer to also discuss some of the edits by phone or in person after the document has been emailed, as I think it is more impactful on the teaching process.

Over time, depending on the mentor and mentee and the exact point in the mentee's career, a long-term relationship may occur. For example, some medical students want a project for residency applications and some medical residents want a project for fellowship application. On completion, this may be the end of the relationship as the mentee moves into other stages of their career and life. In contrast, the mentor-mentee relationship can be sustained over a career and at one point the mentee becomes a collaborator (in my personal experience, with Dr Ryan Law for example, a former mentee who reviewed this manuscript for me) with their own projects, whereas at other times the mentee becomes the mentor. Finally, although the

mentor is often from the mentee's own institution, it can be done across institutions. I have had many mentees approach me at national meetings and even by email to say they are interested in being mentored, which has led to mentoring and subsequent publications. In fact, I was able to develop a mentee-mentor relationship with Dr Richard Kozarek during the very end of my advanced endoscopy fellowship while he was a visiting professor, and this has had a profound impact on my career. We continue to speak often, nearly 30 years later.

As discussed above, after a mentor-mentee relationship that has evolved to one of trust, the mentor can facilitate advancement of the mentee's career in the form of letters of recommendation for additional training, referral for appointments in societies that will benefit the mentee's career, or serve as a reference for job applications.

In summary, a successful mentor-mentee relationship requires effort and commitment on both sides,

although when the situation works well, it seems effortless. Honesty and open communication are essential for success.

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