

## How to Select a Mentor as a Trainee and Junior Faculty



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*The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves.*

Steven Spielberg



I am certain that I have no special wisdom about selecting mentors, but I am absolutely certain of the importance of mentorship in career development. In every profession and vocation, guidance by an experienced hand is an important key to success. Many of my colleagues and friends have contrib-

uted their personal perspectives on mentoring in this column. I approach this from the perspective of a trainee or young faculty member seeking a mentor, and discuss key qualities of the mentor and mentee that may help enable success.

### Identifying a Mentor

Although some GI programs have organized systems to ensure that new fellows and faculty identify mentors, many do not, leaving the onus on the new fellow/faculty. For GI fellows, the initial entry into mentorship can be facilitated by the GI Fellowship Program Director, who will know the faculty, and can help to identify a good “fit.” In our program, fellows are also encouraged to meet and interview faculty during the first months of fellowship, and find the type of mentor that will help with career planning and specific research projects.

For new faculty, the division head can help to enable the mentorship pathway. In our program, we ask faculty to work with one of the midlevel or senior faculty, meet on a quarterly basis, and report on progress. Ultimately, most faculty can and should seek >1 mentor (see below), to meet specific needs for faculty development. I consider these first years as a faculty member as especially fragile, and the need for guidance essential.

### General Qualities of a Good Mentor

An effective mentor must be selfless—more interested in your success than his or her own. The mentor should be experienced enough to be able to help you navigate the ups and downs, the good times and disappointments that are inevitable in any career. The mentor should be an effective communicator—for you. There should be an effective meshing of personality and lifestyle that enables comfortable, open communication. The ideal mentor will have some track record with prior mentees; effective mentorship requires experience as a mentor.

There are several potential types of mentors, and most trainees and junior faculty need more than one.

### Career Development Mentor

As a trainee or new faculty member, you want someone familiar with career expectations who can help to set tangible goals and timelines. This mentor will often be a more senior person who has already navigated tough career decisions. Perhaps the most important roles of this mentor is to help set goals and provide constructive criticism, which applies to both fellows and junior faculty. An experienced mentor can help you to clarify goals and timelines to ensure success.

GI fellows may want and need guidance about identifying a niche within the GI space, (hepatology, interventional endoscopy, luminal GI) that might be fit best with career goals. Many GI fellows have not done much research, so introducing the fellow to research ideas and concepts can be an important step to lighting the fire for scientific inquiry, and making it a little less daunting.

The goals for junior faculty may be different and might be focused on completing a grant, writing a manuscript, or moving up for promotion. When I meet with junior faculty, we try to review the progress toward each benchmark (manuscript, grant, and/or promotion), and develop a realistic timeline for the next meeting. This creates a set of expectations, so that the mentee is clear about what needs to be done, and when.

It is very difficult to look into the mirror and detect issues and problems that might impede a career. The toughest

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job of the mentor is providing that honest mirror, with the goal of helping the mentee be the best at whatever they want to be. At times, this means honest feedback that is encouraging and constructive without being destructive—a delicate balancing act. For most of us in medicine, we have reached a GI fellowship or junior faculty position because we are talented, smart, and successful, and have experienced relatively few stumbles or failures. As we advance to the next level, there are more bumps in the road, and more opportunities to stumble. If you are not aware that you are struggling to meet expectations, it is unlikely that you will meet them. I am reminded of this comment on mentorship: “If your mentors only tell you that you are awesome, it is time to find other mentors” (Cosette Gutierrez).

As a senior faculty member, I am still searching for ways that I can improve what I do. I view my career as a continuous quality improvement project—it evolves, changes, and I can always get better at what I do. My job as a career development mentor is to help the mentee with self-recognition so that they can develop these lifelong skills for self-improvement.

Another attribute of a career development mentor is to be there when you stumble and help pick you up. All of us have had papers and research grants rejected. Babe Ruth once said, “Never let fear of striking out stand in your way.” My first attempt at submission of a large VA cooperative study on colorectal cancer screening was rejected. With the guidance and encouragement of mentors, I rewrote and resubmitted a successful proposal. This project ended up with three papers in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and additional papers in *JAMA*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and *Gastroenterology*. Successful careers require some persistence, even when facing some heavy headwinds. As an African proverb says: “Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.” An effective mentor can be an invaluable resource to help navigate troubled times.

My role as a career development mentor includes using my connections to help the mentee make helpful connections. Early in my career, my mentor introduced me to GI colleagues and professional organizations and their committees. A door was opened to colleagues around the country who might have common interests and could be potential collaborators. When I embarked on developing a VA cooperative study on colorectal cancer screening, I had developed friendships around the country that enabled me to put together a group of collaborators for the grant. This could not have happened without effective networking, and that networking started with a mentor helping me make the connections.

To summarize, an effective career development mentor will (1) help you set goals and timelines, (2) provide honest feedback about progress, (3) provide support when there are bumps in the road, and (4) enable connections to help your career.

### *Qualities of a Career Development Mentor*

1. Cares about your career development—you can trust that this person wants you to succeed.

2. Listens to you and what you want to achieve, and provides guidance, not ownership.
3. Provides honest constructive feedback
4. Provides clear expectations; helps you set goals and timelines to meet those expectations.
5. Provides support when you stumble.
6. A connector, who can help you make key connections.

### **Content Mentor**

One of the most exciting and stimulating aspects of an academic career is the opportunity to ask questions, and develop research to attempt to answer these questions. Research starts with good questions. A content mentor can provide a reality test for research ideas. As an expert familiar with the specific research topic, this mentor will know what has already been done, and what key questions need to be answered with more research. The mentor will also know the flaws of research in this area, and potential pitfalls to avoid. An effective content mentor can help you frame questions and hypotheses, and write a research proposal or grant. Content may include specific knowledge of a subject area, analytic technique, and/or how to write a successful grant. The ideal content mentor will have a track record of personal success in research and grants, and a record of successfully guiding other mentees toward research success.

### *Qualities of Content Mentor*

1. Knows the content area well enough to advise you on what has or has not been previously studied.
2. Successful grant recipient.
3. Successful author who can constructively critique your papers.

### **Life Coach Mentor**

Our professional life is only 1 part of a much bigger picture. Understanding how to balance the often conflicting demands of work, family and outside activities can sometimes require help. In a career like medicine, it is easy to get sucked into the vortex of clinical work or research at the expense of balance. This is a formula for burnout, not success.

In my career, life coach mentors have taught me by their example. When I was a first-year medical student, I spent a month working with a primary care provider in the small town of Tecumseh, Michigan. Dr Carlton Cook was the beloved town doctor, who was type cast from another era. Basically he did everything. In the morning, he would operate in the small community hospital (removing tonsils, gallbladders, appendices), deliver babies, and then in the afternoon would see patients in an outpatient clinic. In his spare time, he served on the city council, sang in a barber-shop quartet, and flew a small 2-engine plane for fun on weekends. I would meet him at the hospital every morning,

scrub in for surgery, and would get to do a little suturing and help deliver babies. What a heady experience right after my first year of medical school. At noon, we would walk 5 minutes to his house for lunch with his entire family, and then back to the clinic for the afternoon, where I would really get to know his patients. I flew with him in the little 2-seater plane on several weekends around southern Michigan. More than anyone, he taught me the art of medicine, the importance of getting to know your patients, and recognizing your limitations. He also taught me the importance of having balance in life. He worked hard, spent quality time with his family, and had a lot of fun.

Another life coach mentor for me was Emmet Keeffe. Emmet became a junior faculty member when I was a GI fellow. We became close friends and running partners during my fellowship, and spent time backpacking in the Oregon cascades. He was a career mentor, but an invaluable personal mentor as well. Emmet and his wife, Melenie, were our “parent mentors” as we started a family. Both of these life coach mentors worked hard at medicine, but maintained a healthy balance in their lives, and they never lost sight of the importance of family and friends in their lives, lessons I have tried to pass on to others.

## The Mentee

Mentorship is a 2-way road, and there are qualities of the mentee that can help to ensure a successful relationship. The mentee should be honest about career goals and comfortable talking about perceived barriers. A mentee who is receptive to feedback and can avoid becoming defensive when critiqued, and can pick himself or herself up then

there is a bump in the road has a higher likelihood of achieving the desired goals. As a mentor, I enjoy a mentee who demonstrates some internal drive and brings his/her ideas to the table, not waiting for me to lay out a career path.

## Qualities of an effective Mentee

1. Open to feedback and self-improvement.
2. Takes initiative—brings goals and ideas to the table.
3. Completes tasks on time.
4. Persistent. Understands there will be bumps in the road and resilient enough to overcome those challenges.
5. Values balance in life.

In conclusion, perhaps the best quote about mentoring I know, comes from William Butler Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” As a mentor I want to help light that fire and help my mentee see their potential, and reach their goals. I do not see my role as shaping goals, but enabling them. Robert Frost said: “I am not a teacher, but an awakener.”

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### Conflicts of interest

The author discloses no conflicts.