



University of Pittsburgh

Starting a Career in Academic Medicine: How to be a Clinical Investigator

Choosing the Best Mentor

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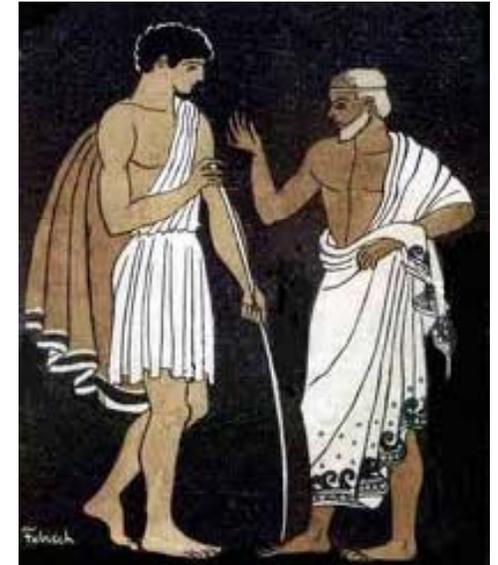
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Mentor was a Greek

- Mentor (Greek: Μέντωρ) was an old man and trusted friend of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*.
- Odysseus placed Mentor in charge of his infant son, Telemachus, while he left for 20 years to fight the Trojan War.
- Telemachus struggled to gain knowledge of his father. The goddess Athena disguised herself as Mentor and guided him through his journeys to find his father. Mentor himself was a minor character.
- First modern usage of "mentor": François Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai, wrote "*Les Aventures de Télémaque*" (1699). Most reprinted book of 18th century and tells of the adventures of Telemachus in search of his father. "[Mentor] regulated the whole course of the life of Telemachus in order to raise him to the highest pitch of glory."



From Les aventures de Télémaque in 1699



What is a mentor? What is mentoring?

- Oxford Dictionary: “one who fulfils the office which the supposed Mentor fulfilled towards Telemachus. An experienced and trusted adviser”
- “Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction” (John C. Crosby)
- Ongoing relationship of learning and communication; formal or informal
- “Mentoring is a developmental partnership through which one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the personal and professional growth of someone else. We all have a need for insight that is outside of our normal life and educational experience. The power of mentoring is that it creates a one-of-a-kind opportunity for collaboration, goal achievement and problem-solving” (USC CMCIS Alumni Society).
- Roles: counselor, role model, cheerleader, coach, confidante, guardian, teacher, developer of talent, provides inspiration



Goals and expectations of a new investigator

- Become an independent researcher
- Generate innovative ideas – branch out in new directions while maintaining focus
- Carve out an area of unique expertise – develop a professional identity
- Secure grant funding, publications
- Time management – balance clinical, research, and personal demands on your time



How a mentor can guide a new investigator: Transmission of knowledge and skills

- Helps you with the science: sounding board for research ideas
 - Is my hypothesis sound?
 - Are my plans for hypothesis testing logical, rigorous, feasible?
 - Are the questions I seek to answer through my research important?
- Reviews grants and manuscripts- grantsmanship, how to write effectively



How a mentor can guide a new investigator: Transmission of strategy

- Promotes you nationally (e.g. conference participation and leadership roles)
- Career planning- helps you define short and long term goals and priorities
- Keeps you on track with respect to timeline for career milestones
 - When am I ready to write my first NIH grant?
 - Am I on track for promotion? If not, what do I need to do to get back on track?
 - Identifies timely opportunities (grants, election to societies, etc.)
- Psychosocial support
- Provides networking opportunities



Desirable attributes in a mentor

- Commitment, time, and skill
- Optimistic and upbeat
- Accessible
- Defines expectations
- Supportive – your advocate
- Gets to know you – your aspirations, learning style, strengths and weaknesses
- Good listener, makes you feel safe
- Open to feedback
- Challenges you – no spoon feeding
- Encourages you to spread your wings but pulls you in if you get off track
- Confident enough to put your interests ahead of theirs – lets you shine



Mentor- Mentee match

- Share mutual interests
- Field of expertise doesn't have to match exactly
- Expectations should be aligned- Clone? Apprentice? Intellectual partner?
- Interpersonal styles should ideally be compatible
 - Formal vs informal
 - Micromanager vs. "big picture" person
 - Hands-on vs. laissez faire
 - Perspective on "work/life" balance



Choosing the best mentor – getting the most out of a mentoring relationship

- Having a mentor is important – you should look far and wide until you find a good fit
- Identify your needs
- Know yourself – know “what makes you tick” and find someone who can help keep you ticking
- Having more than one mentor is OK
- A good mentor will fully engage with a mentee who is motivated, energetic, resourceful, and intellectually aggressive – see the relationship as reciprocal
- A good mentoring relationship can be richly rewarding for both mentor and mentee