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Virginia Commonwealth University

Mentorship Manual for Medical Students

VCU School of Medicine

Medical College of Virginia Campus

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Mentoring involves a long-term relationship between a mentor and a protégé that encompasses sharing of both professional and personal lives of the participants. The mentor serves as a teacher, role model, resource, advisor, supporter, and advocate who works one-on-one with his or her protégé to guide and support him or her through education and training.¹⁸ The mentor can enhance the protégé's sense of confidence and increase his or her self-esteem.⁸ It is not essential that the mentor be in the protégé's area of specialty interest, nor must students restrict themselves to having only one mentor. The mentor should simply be genuinely interested in the protégé's development. The purpose of this manual is to offer you guidance on finding a mentor and suggestions on reasonable goals for the relationship.

I. Why do you need a mentor?

Many of you will find yourselves wondering whether you need a mentor. While medical school may seem pretty straight forward – work hard and you'll do well – it is actually an experience that you will want to maximize. You have the opportunity to get to know a number of excellent faculty: professors, researchers, administrators, and clinicians. Talking to some of these faculty and learning from their experiences can enrich your medical school experience. Also, you will be faced with several important decisions throughout medical school:

- Are there research opportunities for me?
- How do I balance professional and personal life?
- In what field of medicine am I interested?
- How might issues of professionalism affect me?

A mentor who knows you well is able to guide you in these decisions. A mentor also can serve as a resource for opportunities that may interest you, such as finding out more about a particular field of medicine, more opportunities for working with patients, or informing you of research opportunities. A mentor can also give you feedback on research projects or patient write-ups you may be doing.¹⁸

Finally, even if you feel that you don't need a mentor now, you may later. If you do need some advice as you go through medical school, it best comes from someone who knows you well. Therefore, it is best to establish a relationship with a mentor before you feel you really need one.

“A mentor is someone who is supportive, honest, knowledgeable, has excellent interpersonal skills, a well-balanced life of work and personal relationships, and is an excellent role model and human being.”

II. Characteristics of a good mentor

A good mentor is someone who has genuine interest in student education and is approachable, accessible, and dependable.¹⁷ S/he is experienced, respected, and resourceful, and willing to share what s/he has learned through his or her training.^{2,9}

A mentor is a good listener and has time to meet with a protégé on a regular basis and to keep up with the student's progress and interests. The mentor should offer assistance with career and professional development and also can serve as a role model for the protégé.^{6,17} S/he should make opportunities known to the protégé and provide support when the protégé is struggling or is stressed. The mentor should give praise as well as constructive criticism. In addition, it is desirable for a mentor to be organized, hard working, patient, enthusiastic, and energetic.^{6,17} If the mentor is unable to help you directly, s/he should be able to seek others who can help. Most importantly, a good mentor makes your medical school experience more rewarding through the knowledge that s/he shares with you.¹⁶

“A mentor is someone who you are comfortable revealing your ignorance to and who will answer even your stupidest questions.”

III. How to find a mentor

While some people may prefer to have an assigned mentor, a pair well-matched on paper does not ensure that the pair will “click.”⁸ In addition, you may find it more rewarding to have sought out and found a mentor on your own, perhaps someone who is not already serving as a mentor to many other students. While it is sometimes luck that a mentor and protégé meet, here are some resources you may find helpful in your search for a mentor:

1. Talk to professors and physicians that you meet through organizations, classes, family, and friends.
2. Foundations of Clinical Medicine: If you feel like you click with a preceptor or a small group leader, see if s/he has some more time to spend with you.
3. Faculty Expertise Directory on the School of Medicine web site www.medschool.vcu.edu/directory/. You can use the search fields to put in your area(s) of interest and get a list of physicians and scientists that you can contact.

4. Health sciences physician search on the VCU Health System web site taurus.vcu.edu/~dctorsrv/physiciansdir.html. You can use search fields and browse through profiles of physicians.
5. The School of Medicine Curriculum Office has a list of course and clerkship directors. If you know a field or subject in which you are interested, you can talk to the director in that field who may be able to suggest someone willing to serve as a mentor.
6. Professional organizations, such as the American Medical Association (www.ama-assn.org), Medical Society of Virginia (msv.org), and Richmond Academy of Medicine (www.ramdocs.org), hold social events where students and doctors can meet and exchange interests and ideas. The Richmond Academy of Medicine offers a mentorship program for medical students. You can learn more about it at their web site under the special interest section.
7. Aileen Edwards, VCU School of Medicine Director of Minority Affairs, is facilitating a Faculty Mentoring Program for underrepresented minority students. Her office is located in the VCU School of Medicine Office of Admissions, Sanger Hall Room 1-014.
8. The VCU School of Medicine Development Office and the MCV Alumni Association have a list of alumni who are interested in speaking with students and offer an array of potential mentors. The Alumni Association encourages student participation at events for alumni, class reunions, and other social events where students can talk with alumni.
9. The School of Medicine Student Activities Office assigns Faculty Advisors. At the beginning of M1, students are asked to identify area(s) of interest. The office then assigns students to faculty members in those fields as best they can. You will find out who your advisor is within the first couple months of M1. While “advisor” does not mean mentor, some students find their assigned faculty advisor to be a good match with their own interests. Meet with your advisor to find out if you are compatible. If you do not think you are compatible with him or her and you find a mentor or someone with interests that more closely resemble yours, you can change your faculty advisor at any time. Ask the faculty member to be your advisor and go to the Student Activities office to let them know that you have changed faculty advisors.

“Towards the end of third year, when you are trying to decide what you want to do, it is nice to have a mentor who respects your talents and will give you their opinion based on what they know about you.”

10. The Student Activities Office is also a great place to get information about whom to talk to in different departments if you are looking for someone in a particular specialty.
11. The Dean's Office has a list of faculty members with current grant funding. You may check this list to see if any research is being done in your area(s) of interest. Check with the researcher to see if you might be helpful.
12. Ask other medical students who have been in medical school longer and have been in contact with more professors and clinicians who they would recommend as a good mentor in your area(s) of interest.
13. Some organizations offer their own mentorship programs:
 - VCU Women in Medicine Faculty Organization offers a mentorship program which pairs female medical students with female physician mentors.
 - Student National Medical Association is working with the local St. Phillip Medical Society to pair minority medical students with resident mentors.
 - Club Med offers a mentorship program where they pair medical students with internists.

IV. Initiating a mentorship relationship

It is important for you to be assertive and willing to initiate the relationship. Many physicians and professors are excited about working with students and are happy to share the knowledge they have acquired through their experiences. Once you have found someone to approach, call or e-mail them and tell them that you are a student interested in (fill in the blank) and you would like to meet with them to learn a little more about (fill in the blank). When you meet with them, come prepared with a few questions you want to ask or be prepared to talk about a project that interests you. Try to gauge their interest in working with you and see if they would be willing to meet with you from time-to-time. Finally, figure out if the person is someone with whom you are comfortable.

It is important not to be pushy. If the person seems too busy to meet with you or say they don't have a lot of spare time, thank them for their time and ask if they can recommend someone else. Also, if you don't feel you can be comfortable with the potential mentor or if they have different interests than yours, try contacting someone else. It may take some searching to find a mentor and you may talk to several physicians or professors before you find the right person.

Your mentor does not need to be a full time faculty member; s/he can be a community physician, a resident, an administrator, or anyone you feel can give you some good advice and is willing to spend some time with you.¹² Your mentor does not have to have the exact same interests as you, be the same gender or same ethnic background as you, have a similar personality to yours, or even necessarily be in the same field of medicine that interests you. The most important thing is that you are able to relate to him or her.⁵ Remember that you may change your mind throughout medical school about what kind of medicine you want to practice and it is through exposure to different fields that you learn what you can see yourself doing.

You can meet with your mentor in his or her office, see patients together, meet for coffee, or any other location that is agreeable to both of you. Try to include professional as well as social meetings.

V. Your role as a protégé

- Be enthusiastic, curious, and ambitious when discussing your interests and learning from your mentor.⁵
- Arrive at all meetings on time. If you are unable to make a meeting time, let your mentor know as soon as possible.
- Respect your mentor's time and space.⁹ Be flexible with meeting times.
- Find out how your mentor would prefer you contact him or her: e-mail, phone number, or pager.
- Keep your mentor(s) informed of your progress. This may be hard to do, especially when classwork is demanding, but it is important to stay connected between meetings. You can easily e-mail your mentor(s) to let him or her know what is going on in your life.

“Having a mentor is like having an anchor — someone to put concerns at rest, someone to chat with when there are too many decisions to make or things seem too stressful.”

• • •

“Mentors are essential for career advancement from the time the protégé enters the door past the time the protégé leaves the mentor's nest.”

- Unless told otherwise, consider the information your mentor tells you to be privileged.
- Be patient — your relationship will build over time.
- Be receptive to suggestions and feedback.
- Your mentor may ask you to participate in a project with him or her. This is a valuable way to give back to your mentor and show him or her that you appreciate the time s/he is spending with you. Use your experience with your mentor to make connections with other people with whom your mentor works. Be sure to work on any agreed upon projects in a timely manner.

VI. What you should accomplish together

- You should try to meet every few months and keep in touch through e-mail between meetings.
- Share your goals for the mentor/protégé relationship.
- Let your mentor know what kinds of things you would like to discuss, see, or do.
- Share information about your personal backgrounds, significant others, family, etc.

VII. Issues influencing your mentor selection

While another manual could be written on this subject alone, it is necessary to mention that differences in gender, race, ethnicity, and age can be factors in your professional development and therefore are good topics to discuss with a mentor.¹⁰ Many female medical students find it useful to discuss with someone how to balance career and family life. They also may benefit from having a role model who is in a field that may be predominantly men.^{14,19} You may want a mentor who is your same gender, race, or ethnicity who is able to discuss with you the unique issues that you are facing.¹ This is particularly a good reason to have more than one mentor. Finally, the age of your mentor may affect his or her perspective on medical training and career. Mentors who have been practicing medicine, doing research, or teaching for many years may have different views from those mentors who have recently finished their residency.

VIII. Changes in the mentorship relationship

Your relationship with your mentor will change over time.¹¹ As you become more independent and resourceful, your mentor can become more of a friend than a teacher.²² Throughout your career as a student and as a doctor, you may find it useful to have a number of different mentors as you reach different stages in your professional training.¹⁸ Each mentor will serve a unique role in your development, and you will continue to learn from each one. You may also find it beneficial to have more than one mentor at a time particularly if you are interested in several different fields. But, try not to overwhelm yourself – you want to have enough time to fully develop a relationship with your primary mentor. In addition, once you have benefited from having a mentor, you will find it rewarding to be a mentor to someone else.¹³ “Mentoring involves the highest level of student-teacher relationship, and, when successful, can be dynamic, vibrant, and fulfilling for both parties.”¹⁸

IX. Thanking your mentor

It is important to thank your mentor periodically for the time that s/he has spent working with you. Remember s/he is taking time out of a busy schedule to help you. Write a thank you note if an interaction particularly helps or inspires you. Finally, consider nominating your outstanding mentor for the VCU School of Medicine Faculty Distinguished Mentor Award. You can learn more about the award and how to nominate someone at www.medschool.vcu.edu/intranet/facdev/ann_teach_awrds.htm. or pick up information in the VCU School of Medicine Office of Faculty and Instructional Development, Sanger Hall Room 1-017.

“Your needs are going to change and so therefore, your mentor can change, that’s okay — you don’t have to stay with the same one throughout your life. And, your mentor will understand that.”

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