Mentorship matters

Mentoring can occur in multiple forms to foster the career development of mentees.

It has been often stated that picking a mentor is probably one of the most important decisions that a student or trainee can make. Mentors can have profound influence over the career directions of their trainees, given that they are frequently among the first to be contacted for insights about those individuals when their mentees are applying for their next position in their career. Some mentor–mentee relationships can last throughout a lifetime, as the power balance between the two normalizes and respect is gained as the former mentee establishes their own independent career by utilizing the problem-solving skills and competencies that were attained during their training period. However, according to a 2019 *Nature* survey, a sizeable portion of PhD candidates experience dissatisfaction with their choice of mentor and the lack of meaningful discussions about career advice and expectations. Too often, this lack of career guidance or a 'sink-or-swim' approach can lead to frustration on the part of the mentee, culminating in their dropping out of programs that they are otherwise qualified to pursue or even leaving the scientific community entirely.

Increasingly, calls are being put forth for students and postdocs to have more than one mentor, as this would make them less dependent on a single individual for their career guidance. Cooke and Ager describe how the British Society for Immunology and the Wellcome Trust are advocating for postdocs to nominate 'developmental' mentors—outside of their host institution—to provide career advice and serve as independent sounding boards in a role that differs from that of the principle investigator.

Given that mentorship matters for the development of the next generation of science researchers, assessment tools are needed to evaluate mentor strengths and areas for improvements. A 2013 study by Fleming et al. provided an assessment tool, called the Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA), which describes a 26-point skills list that can be utilized by institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of mentor training programs, in addition to providing talking points that should be regularly discussed between mentors and their mentees. Among the competencies listed for mentors are the following abilities: to maintain effective communications, to align the expectations of mentees and their career goals, to assess mentee understanding and skill proficiency, to foster independence and confidence, to promote professional development, and to address diversity differences in mentor–mentee relationships—given that white males still represent the majority of those heading research laboratories.

This latter issue has gained prominence as calls for more diversity and inclusion in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields continue to grow. A recent perspective by Davies et al. outlines how the metrics scheme of evaluating scientific success could be changed from one that is heavily reliant on citation counts to one that broadens the definition of scientific impact, includes careers outside of traditional academic settings, and alters the mentorship model to be multidimensional and thereby more inclusive.

The COVID-19 era has also brought unanticipated challenges to the mentor–mentee relationship, given that many countries have had to impose mandatory lockdown periods and social distancing rules, causing laboratories to temporarily close. Research priorities for many in the immunology community have shifted to respond to this virus threat, and these groups are now developing new diagnostic assays to test for the presence of SARS-CoV-2 and running epidemiological testing to track the spread of the virus, as well as profiling multiple parameters of the immune response to SARS-CoV-2 infection to understand the heterogeneity of this infectious disease. Thus, many students and postdocs are faced with putting their own research projects on hold. Others might have been affected more directly by COVID-19 striking within their family or household. In *Nature*, Gotian and Pfund offer tips to mentors on how to adjust to the new normal when advising their mentees after returning to the laboratory, stressing that all will have to reassess their goals and expectations.

In this issue, we inaugurate a new series on Mentorship as a forum to voice diverse viewpoints on the role of mentors. Importantly, traditional views on who can and should be a mentor are changing to be more inclusive. Institutions are recognizing that mentoring is a skill that needs to be fostered and supported. Mentorship is an investment of time and involves listening to the mentee about their career aspirations and providing advice on how to reach those goals. Establishing mentoring networks will benefit both the mentee and the mentor. Importantly, being a mentor is a role that we all can play. ❐

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