The importance of having a mentor, and how to find one

During a fellowship, we are expected to identify a mentor, but understanding what makes a good mentor-mentee relationship is often unclear and ill-defined. This month our guest author, Dr. Christian Stone, discusses his approach to finding a good mentor and how this relationship often enriches the fellowship experience.

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A fellowship in gastroenterology, while brief, is an intense experience that often shapes the individual’s career for many years and perhaps forever. One aspect of a fellowship that may not receive sufficient attention is that of mentoring. Each fellow is expected to pair with an academic faculty member for the duration of the 3-year fellowship or longer. In most training programs, fellows are expected to decide on a mentor before completing the first year of a fellowship. But, understandably, few fellows possess the knowledge necessary to choose the right mentor at that early stage of their careers. This essay intends to shed light on the role of the mentor and will provide practical advice to new fellows on how to choose a good mentor. Establishing a rewarding mentor-mentee relationship can greatly enhance the fellowship experience and pave the way toward a successful academic or private practice career.

First, what is the mentor’s role? In the academic setting, mentoring goes far beyond simply meeting once or twice a year for career advice. Mentors are expected to introduce and guide the fellow into the world of academic life. The traditional duties of the mentor include the following: helping the fellow focus his clinical and research interests, providing opportunities to conduct research, suggesting avenues to obtain additional training when appropriate, providing specific criticism and feedback, and encouraging applications for funding. The mentor must devote sufficient time and effort to foster what is often a close-knit relationship. The mentor should be a full-time academic faculty member for those fellows interested in academia. To a limited extent, an adjunct or clinical professor may be appropriate for fellows who wish to pursue private practice gastroenterology. On occasion, an individual in another medical division or department may be an appropriate mentor. It is often stated that a mentor will have fulfilled his role successfully if the mentee establishes a unique area of research. In the case of bench research, in particular, success is often measured by the fellow having established independent funding for her research. Remember that the mentor-mentee relationship should be mutually beneficial. A good mentor will have your interests in mind, not just his own.

Before you can choose a mentor, it is critical that you formulate some goals for your fellowship. Your research project should be as specific and defined as possible. Avoid the temptation to become involved in writing chapters or reviews. These efforts may yield a publication but do not significantly advance your research career. Have a timeline in mind and look for a project that can be completed within it. Certainly, a mentor can help you decide on a project, but you are better served if you have a specific interest. That way, you will be more willing to put in the effort and overcome the obstacles that are inevitable in any research project.

How do you choose a good mentor? This can be one of the most difficult decisions to make during the fellowship, mostly because fellows rarely know what issues are involved in making a sound decision. If you have a specific research project in mind, then your choices will likely be limited to 1 or 2 faculty. More often than not, however, fellows have a variety of interests and may be considering pairing with faculty who specialize in disparate fields within gastroenterology. In this case, often the project or the personality of the mentor becomes the driving force behind the decision. This is

Key points

- Know the attributes of a good mentor.  
- Have a specific goal or project in mind.  
- A good project combined with a poor mentor equals trouble.  
- A good mentor can steer you away from a poor project.
risky, because your feelings of compatibility with faculty members may distract you from evaluating them for the attributes of effective mentoring. It is important to realize that a good project combined with a poor mentor can, and often does, result in an unsatisfying experience.

When a number of faculty members are being considered, the following questions should be addressed. Does the mentor have sufficient time? All academic faculty members are busy. But a mentor who travels frequently or is simply not available to meet on a regular basis may not be the ideal candidate, regardless of his academic success. How often should you expect to meet with a mentor? This is variable, but significant discussion should occur on a monthly basis at a minimum. What is the track record of the mentor? A faculty member who has never demonstrated a successful mentoring relationship may also not be an ideal candidate. Particularly in the basic sciences, the mentor should have paved the way for prior fellows to become successful independent researchers with funding. Is the mentor proposing a research project that is appropriate? Too often, fellows or junior faculty agree to participate in large-scale, multicenter, or even multidisciplinary projects that are too complex and cannot be completed within the fellowship period. A good mentor will steer the fellow toward a project that is more manageable, can be completed in a reasonable amount of time, and is of high yield with regard to abstract application and publication. Ideally, the fellow should assume the majority of control over the project rather than simply function as one of many individuals, each with only peripheral involvement.

What if you want to change your mentor? Fellows should not be afraid to voice their concerns about a project or their mentor. If you feel that you are not getting the experience you want with a mentor, then it is best to change mentors. This scenario occurs quite frequently and is a source of much anxiety to the fellow. A discussion with the division chief is essential to resolving this difficult situation. The division chief can provide much relief by approaching the mentor on your behalf to facilitate ending the mentor-mentee relationship that has gone awry. Your chief can also assist you in finding a new mentor. Similarly, if it appears that a research project cannot be accomplished, it behooves you to share your feelings with the mentor or the division chief so that a new project can be suggested.

Following the advice above can help the fellow avoid many of the frustrations that can be encountered with regard to the mentoring experience. The bottom line is that it is your career, so arm yourself with the necessary knowledge early so that you can make the right choices for yourself. Having an effective mentor, combined with your own determination and persistence, will go far to helping you realize your goals within the short span of fellowship training and beyond.

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