



Find a Functional Mentor

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Are you having trouble finding the mentoring that you need? Feeling isolated and alone? Don't know where to start or whom to ask? Functional mentoring may be the answer.

Jane Brown, MD, has just been hired on the clinician–educator track in the OB-Gyn Department of Big State University Medical Center. She has a busy practice in women's health, specializing in infertility, seeing patients four days a week, participating in the call schedule of the division on a rotating basis, and precepting a resident clinic once a week. Her chair has asked her to develop a new clinical rotation for fourth-year medical students in reproductive endocrinology. She has the clinical skills and the content knowledge, but she has never created a curriculum before. What should Jane do?

This situation is typical of new faculty in a busy academic health center. Junior faculty, hired for their expertise in a clinical or research area, often have limited understanding of the world of academic medicine. Most lack the full array of skills necessary to excel as academicians. Some academic health centers have begun to nurture junior faculty through professional development programs and mentoring.

Effective mentoring enhances both individual and institutional performance. Professional societies have also recognized the importance of networking and mentoring, and some have developed programs that incorporate mentoring for professional socialization. Despite the increased emphasis on faculty development and mentoring, are you feeling isolated and left to make it on your own?

At its heart, mentoring encompasses a supportive relationship and a teaching–learning process. In the fullest context, mentoring involves advising, coaching, role modeling, assessing, providing feedback, and sponsoring others. For the individual, mentoring provides skill development, professional socialization, and career counseling—ideally leading to faculty advancement and enhanced career satisfaction.¹ Institutions benefit from the retention of native faculty

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talent, enhanced productivity of faculty (both protégés and mentors), and continued engagement of faculty—leading to sustained institutional vitality.² Traditionally, mentoring relationships develop through informal interactions with other faculty members. However, junior faculty often struggle to find mentors.^{2,3}

How Can Dr. Brown Get the Help She Needs?

Functional mentoring is one solution. Functional mentoring occurs between a faculty member with specific needs and a mentor with the specific skills and expertise to meet those needs. They come together to focus on a project such as developing a course or curriculum, writing a grant, starting a new area of research, or developing a new clinical service. The mentoring relationship develops as work on the project progresses. Functional mentoring lasts until the project is completed, but may continue if both parties agree. It may involve discussions beyond the project (such as career counseling) and lead to further work together. Functional mentoring is a strategy to “jump-start” your search to obtain the mentoring that you need—with or without the assistance of a formal institutional mentoring program.

How Does One Find a Functional Mentor?

Start by identifying the issue or a project that is important for progress in your

academic career. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ❖ What are the knowledge, skills, and expertise that I need to be able to do this project or tackle this issue?
- ❖ What strengths do I bring to this project?
- ❖ What are my areas of need?
- ❖ What specific help do I need to be able to complete this project?
- ❖ What scholarly products (publications, presentations) do I hope to generate from the project?

Next, identify a senior person, preferably in your institution—but potentially at your university, or within your profession nationally—who has the skills and ability to fill the gaps that you have identified. You might ask your division chief or chair for assistance in identifying an appropriate individual. Search the faculty database at your institution and the university. Look in the membership directory and within the organizational leadership of your regional and national professional organizations. The faculty affairs/faculty development dean at your institution may be another resource to help you identify an appropriate individual.

In Jane Brown's case, her goal is to develop a new course in reproductive endocrinology. She needs a mentor with specific expertise in education and curriculum development. Jane might look at current course directors, members of curriculum committees, or others involved in education within her institution. An education expert at another school or from the education committee of her professional society may be the one to meet her needs. Jane's mentor does not need to have expertise in ob-gyn or reproductive endocrinology; Jane has that content knowledge. She needs educational expertise.

Think big! You may be surprised by the affirmative response by a faculty “star” or academic leader when you approach him or her with a focused, specific request for assistance. A word of caution, however: Be prepared when you approach the faculty member. A request for mentoring that is specific,

focused, and time-limited is more likely to be considered by busy senior faculty. Identify the time frame for the project, the deadlines for task completion (such as grant proposal deadlines), and the time that you anticipate that you will need from the faculty member.

Once you have secured an agreement from your new mentor, use the time efficiently and wisely. Schedule regular meetings, come prepared for them, and be open to feedback and critique. Respect the time and other commitments of your mentor by being diligent in your work efforts and efficient in your communications. Utilize multiple forms of communication (e-mail, phone calls, lunch or coffee breaks) to keep information flowing back and forth on a regular basis, especially when your mentor is particularly busy, traveling, or located at a site other than yours.

Be sure to consider your goals for scholarship in discussing your project with your mentor. Remember that academic work is not complete until it is published and disseminated. You will be measured for advancement in the promotion and tenure process by your record of scholarship. Opportunities for scholarship are not always obvious. Although it is straightforward to envision a paper or papers generated from a bench or clinical research project, projects in education or community engagement may need more forethought to plan appropriate evaluation to demonstrate their impact. You may need to work with your mentor to identify opportunities for grant funding, and also for publication and/or presentation of results.

In Jane's case, for example, it is not sufficient for her to design and implement a new course; she must also evaluate the effectiveness of her approach and disseminate the results. That evaluation will generate scholarship: a presentation at her national professional meeting and ultimately a publication. Her mentor should be a rich source of advice, providing suggestions about where to present, where to submit, as well as critical reviewer of presentations and papers.

Does Functional Mentoring Work? Can It Be Applied at the Institutional Level?

Functional mentoring has been incorporated into a professional development



Robert J. Milner, PhD, Luanne E. Thorndyke, MD, and Maryellen E. Gusic, MD (left to right): "In the fullest context, mentoring involves advising, coaching, role modeling, assessing, providing feedback, and sponsoring others."

program at the Penn State College of Medicine: the Junior Faculty Development Program.^{4,5} The mentoring program complements a year-long course with a curriculum in career development, research, education, and clinical practice. Each participant undertakes an individual project that he or she has identified and has received approval from the chair to conduct. The junior faculty engage in a process to self-assess their (mentoring) needs and, after utilizing the resources available at our institution, identify a potential mentor. Just as we have described with Jane Brown, participants determine the aspects of their projects for which they need guidance and identify senior faculty who have the corresponding skills or expertise. Once the mentoring pairs are finalized, junior faculty identify the goals for their projects, establish timelines, and schedule meetings. The mentor provides review, critique, and suggestions for the project. The mentor works with the junior faculty member for the length of the course (approximately nine months), although some pairs have continued to work together to complete projects lasting more than one year and on new or additional projects.

In the last five years of the program, more than 125 junior faculty have completed projects in research, education, and clinical areas. In fact, the "Janes" in our program have created 34 new curricula and courses for medical students, residents, and faculty

in the College of Medicine. Evaluations show continued high satisfaction with the program, and reveal that mentors had a significant impact on projects.^{4,5} Junior faculty report that the projects have a significant impact on their career focus and potential for advancement. In addition, projects were new ventures that made a contribution to the institution. Many junior faculty report that mentoring extends beyond the focus of the project—an unanticipated, yet desirable, outcome. Importantly, junior faculty have developed the ability to establish and navigate new mentoring relationships—an important skill for their ongoing development and success.

Take Charge!

So, don't wait for that mythical, all-knowing mentor to find you; get moving! You need a functional mentor! Think about a project or a task that you have been asked to do, one that you would like to do, or one that you believe will advance your academic career. Identify your needs to make this project a success, and find a functional mentor to meet those needs. Your efforts will pay off with a tangible product at the end of the process—a completed and successful project to add to your dossier and, in turn, advance your career. Finally, take time to celebrate with your mentor, and then move on to a new goal! ♦

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