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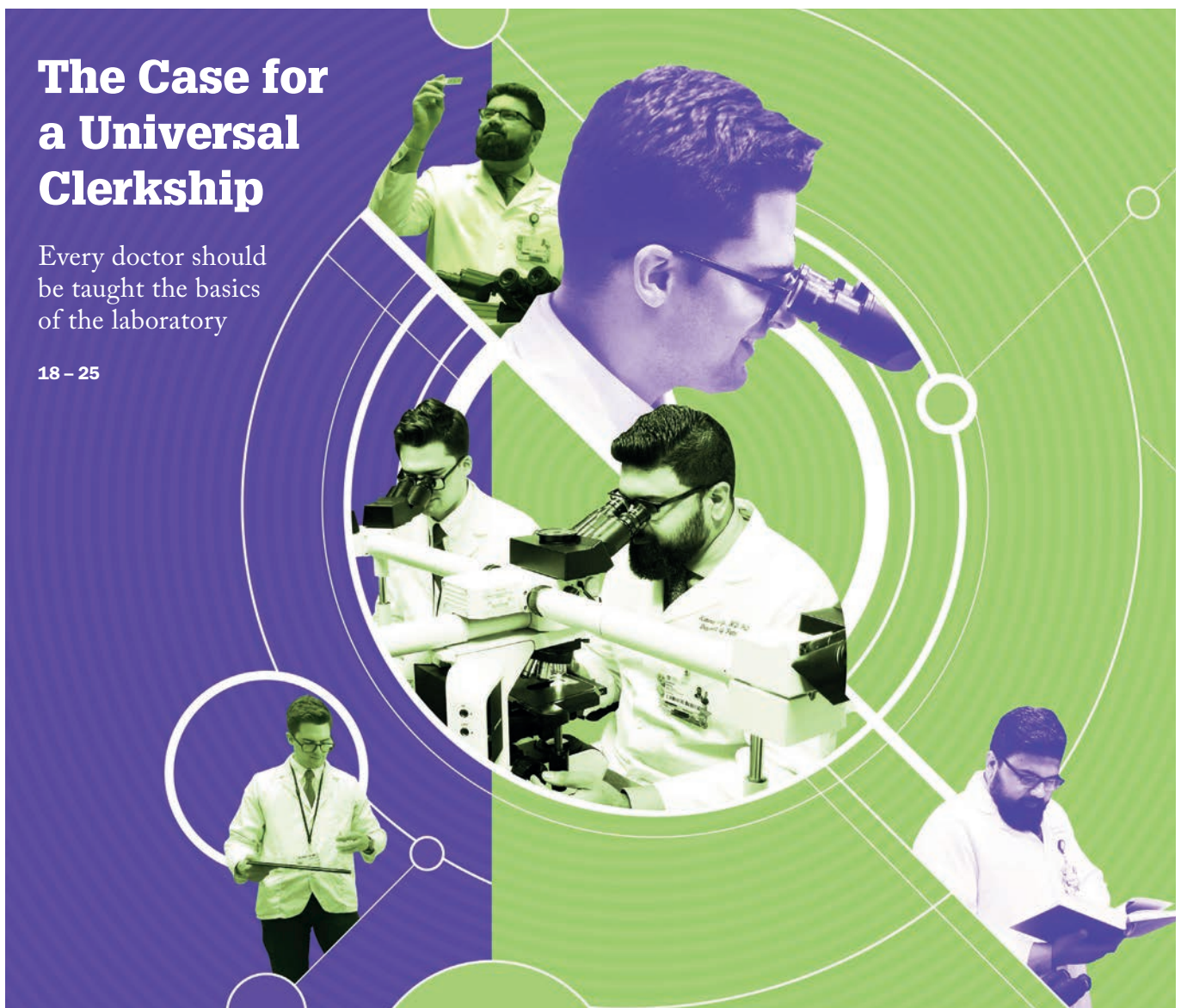
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Career Connections

Avrum Gotlieb discusses the value of mentoring for those on both sides of the relationship, regardless of each person's career stage.

Career Connections

At every stage of your career, mentorships are a valuable resource

By Avrum Gotlieb

No two laboratory medicine professionals share the same career path – and, similarly, no two have the same resources available to them to assist in their development. Some academic institutions may have career centers, formal programs (such as educational sessions or job shadowing), or reference materials. Others may provide little or no guidance. But one resource available at every institution is the experience of those who have gone before. That's why, regardless of where you are and what other options you have, mentorship will always be a vital part of career development.

What is mentorship?

I define mentorship as a special bilateral

At a Glance

- *Mentoring is a special relationship that provides long-lasting benefits to both participants*
- *Prospective mentees should seek out mentors whose careers, experience, and outside interests are compatible with their own*
- *Mentors must commit to advising mentees on how to navigate their careers by listening carefully, assisting informed choices, and helping identify and overcome barriers*
- *Although relationships within the mentee's discipline are highly informative, cross-disciplinary mentorships can offer surprising new insights*

relationship built on respect, integrity, and empathy. In such a relationship, the mentor and mentee enthusiastically interact to promote the mentee's career. The mentor is an advisor who acts to support the mentee in making work-life decisions by providing useful information and suggesting options. They want to see the mentee succeed and, in doing so, help build a strong academic community of confident and innovative scholars. Faculty are encouraged to have more than one mentor (but not too many), because each mentor will bring specific academic expertise and life experiences to issues related to gender, diversity, disability, economic perspectives, and much more.

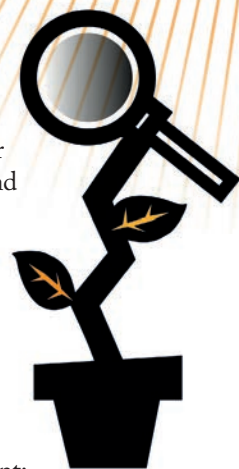
Academic life can be complex. Understanding what lies ahead at each step of the way is invaluable when making decisions and plans for the future. Academic pathology is a long, tough road that requires hard work, motivation, and well-developed intellectual and applied skill sets. Individual pathologists must make difficult work-life choices and overcome numerous obstacles during training, job hunting, progression through the academic ranks, and beyond. One goal of the mentoring relationship is to promote resilience in the mentee and foster innovation in all aspects of academic work. Having an experienced colleague whose main motivation is to help you succeed will make the journey less onerous and difficult; in fact, in my opinion, it is absolutely essential.

This human relationship occurs in real time, so every piece of feedback helps mentees shape their thoughts and actions. Mentorship requires availability and attention from both sides. Mentees need to identify the areas where they need help, formulate appropriate questions, listen to their advisors, and, where appropriate, incorporate their input into solutions; mentors need to spot areas of difficulty for

their mentees, listen to their problems and questions, and provide carefully considered assistance. When the relationship is working smoothly, mentors look out for their mentees, and mentees have a deep appreciation for the mentor's time and effort. It's a unique aspect of career development; you cannot get anything like it from a book, the Internet, a lecture on career development, or casual hallway consults. Whereas other resources are static, a mentor has not only been where the mentee is now; they are also aware of current events, the academic community in your region or specialty, and factors that may be unique to your situation. They can provide up-to-date, nuanced information and advice. If the relationship works, both participants build trust over time, leading to greater honesty, confidence in advice and conversations, and even comfort during stressful times. The mentor provides information, suggests options, and advises on how to achieve goals – but must not make decisions for the mentee.

In my experience

I was very fortunate in having caring academic teachers and supervisors who helped me along the way. From them, I learned a lot about how to navigate the twists and turns of my own career. Some of these folks became mentors – and, when that happened, I always felt that they were on my side and would encourage me to follow the right path. Not everyone has the same career goals and priorities, and a





true mentor will help you to achieve your own aspirations, rather than those that others may consider important. My own mentors provided me with opportunities to learn what it takes to achieve academic success, and to perform in a protected environment, allowing me to test myself and my skills.

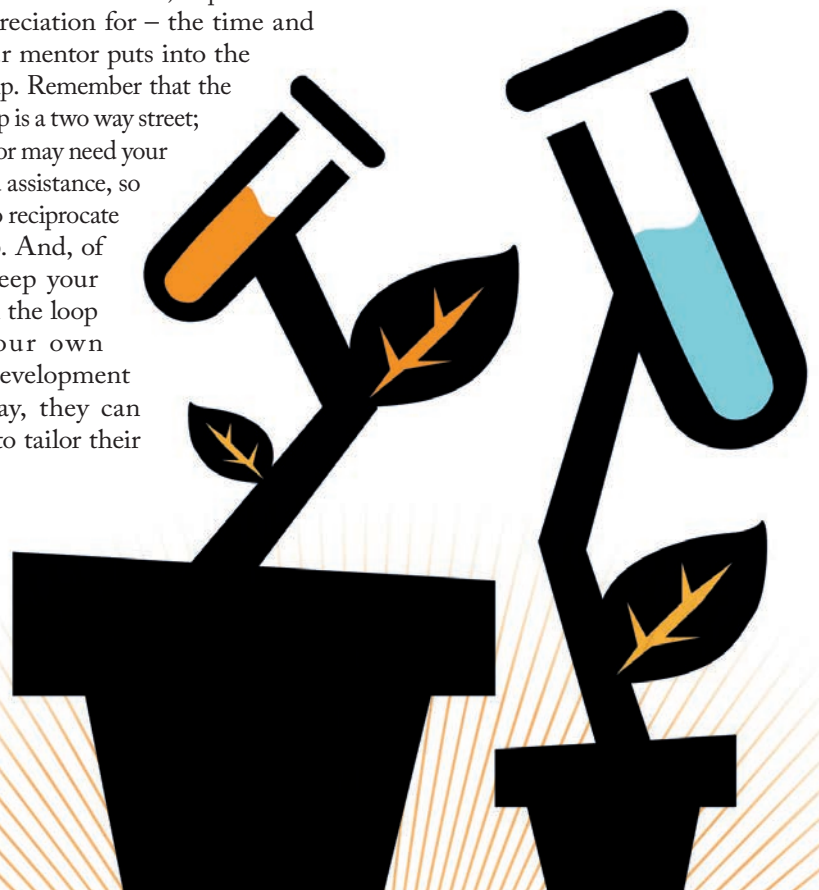
As a mentee, I was offered teaching and course development opportunities which, although they added a lot of work to my regular duties, were very valuable in my career development. Mentors were instrumental in providing me with research opportunities studying the pathogenesis of disease, and they encouraged and supported me to attend research meetings and clinical pathology meetings and courses. They made it very clear to me how one trains for an academic career in pathology and how to make the most of my residency, my fellowship, and then my junior faculty position.


Over the course of my career, I have seen the nature of mentorship change; the approach isn't quite the same as it was when I was a young pathologist. Then, mentorship was a natural activity; many academics felt it was their duty to mentor the next generation. They valued the process and derived as much satisfaction from acting as advisors and role models as their protégés did from the informal education they received. Face-to-face interactions formed the backbone of the relationship and forged strong connections between mentors and mentees. As bureaucracy continues to creep into academic pathology, though,

mentorship has become more formalized. This has both good and bad aspects. Mentors are trained, rules for mentorship are established, and outcomes are measured by both the mentor and the mentee. This ensures that both parties are safeguarded and can benefit from the relationship – but it also removes some of the spontaneity and can result in a “box-ticking” mentality. It's up to us as mentors and mentees to keep the spirit of mentorship alive forging relationships that are responsive and adaptable to the inevitable changes in our lives and our environments.

Finding (and being) the right mentor
A good mentor fits well with your own work and lifestyle interests (and, for some, this may mean working with multiple mentors). One thing matters above all else: the mentor you choose needs to be truly interested in you as a person and as a professional. The relationship needs time to develop so that both participants are comfortable discussing intellectually or emotionally difficult issues in confidence. As a mentee, respect – and show appreciation for – the time and effort your mentor puts into the relationship. Remember that the relationship is a two way street; your mentor may need your advice and assistance, so be ready to reciprocate their help. And, of course, keep your mentor in the loop about your own career development – that way, they can continue to tailor their

“Throughout my career, I’ve always had an instinct for finding really good teachers and collaborators, and I think that has been one of the most important advantages I’ve had.”





advice to suit your situation.

If you're interested in becoming a mentor, make sure that you are highly motivated and willing to put in the time and effort needed to be effective. Mentorship should become a high priority for you – not an afterthought that you try to fit into your busy clinical and research schedule. Select your mentees carefully and make sure that you are a good match; it's essential that you feel comfortable with your mentee and align your mentorship with their expectations. Many mentorships arise spontaneously from informal relationships or prior encounters, but some are initiated by matching. In fact, some departments require that all junior faculty have mentors, whether assigned or self-chosen. Although good mentorship cannot be forced, the importance these departments are placing on establishing those relationships is a clear indicator of the value they have to academic pathologists.

Mentorship should be a valued academic activity that departments and institutions recognize in performance evaluations, or even by offering mentorship awards. It is also an area of academic scholarship; some faculty may do research on mentorship and establish or direct formal mentoring infrastructures in their institutions. Pathology departments need to create opportunities for their faculty to mentor, whether formally or otherwise – and the most successful departments will set up mentorships for their non-pathologist staff members as well. For academic pathologists, some departments create an infrastructure that provides both a clinical mentor and a research/education mentor. Regardless of how many mentors you have and what resources each one offers, you – and they – can benefit from guidance aimed at establishing

a successful relationship. It's true that some mentors have natural abilities, but most can benefit from some formal training.

Senior mentor-mentee relationships may seem more daunting, but they are conceptually no different to those involving junior faculty. The parameters, processes, and outcomes should be the same. At this level, though, it's important to take particular care that a hierarchical relationship does not develop and that academic supervisors and evaluations are not entangled with the mentoring relationship. Mid- to senior-level mentorships can be more challenging than mentoring early-career faculty because both parties are more entrenched in their thinking and must take more time to listen and identify one another's specific needs. Common topics discussed at this level include maintaining success, rebooting a career, or beginning to plan for a transition into retirement.

Strengths and stumbling blocks

Mentorship promotes the creation of communities of pathologists and laboratory medicine professionals who care for one other and assist each other in a collegial way. By helping younger faculty move forward and do their very best, mentors enhance the

brand of their department and institution, making them more attractive to faculty, staff, and students. A good reputation for – and attitude toward – mentoring can vastly improve recruitment and retention.

The only major downside is when the mentor-mentee relationship breaks down. Whether or not a department has a formal mentoring program, it must have processes in

place to deal with this eventuality in an appropriate manner so that all parties can move forward without negative consequences.

Beyond the walls of your department, or even your field of study, mentorship is about forming a relationship to promote successful work-life balance. Many mentorship “rules” cross departmental and even discipline boundaries. And although professionals in your own field will be familiar with your discipline and how to effectively navigate it, non-pathologist mentors can promote innovation and paradigm shifts in your thinking. Don't limit your selection of mentors (or mentees) to faculty members in your field; consider other staff members who may have valuable insights about your department or laboratory medicine in general – or scholars in other disciplines who may bring new insights to your career.

For me, mentorship has been a very positive experience. As a mentee, I've benefited greatly in my career development; as a mentor, I've seen many students and colleagues successfully launch and grow their own careers. My mentorship interactions led me to put pen to paper to write two booklets on career development in pathology and, subsequently, a book for students, trainees, and junior faculty on career development (now in its second edition). I will continue to promote the benefits of mentorship and to guide as many prospective participants as I can to help my discipline – and its reputation – grow.

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