

6 points to keep in mind when seeking and securing mentors

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Mentors can advise you on medical school, residency, specialty choice and career moves. But how do you find the right people to help you? Here is advice from a young physician on how to find and get the most out of your mentors in medicine.

Valerie Vaughn, MD, MSc (@ValerieVaughnMD), recently completed a fellowship at the University of Michigan Medical School and is now a junior faculty member there. In a recent *JAMA* essay, “Mentee Missteps: Tales From the Academic Trenches,” she and her co-authors offered witty yet trenchant observations on the common mistakes young physicians make when they hitch their wagons to mentors in their fields—and how they can learn from these mistakes and avoid making them in the future.

In an interview with *AMA Wire*®, Dr. Vaughn expanded on the mentor-protégé relationship, which she described as “absolutely critical” to the academic and professional success of every fledgling physician. “You literally cannot advance without a mentor,” she said.

As she transitions from mostly mentee to mostly mentor—you are never completely one or the other, as you will be learning and teaching your entire life, Dr. Vaughn pointed out—the physician proffered advice to medical students, interns, residents and young physicians on how to secure an effective mentor and maintain a professional relationship of mutual benefit.

First, remember that you can have more than one mentor—and that you probably should. “One mentor cannot be everything to you,” Dr. Vaughn said. Some mentors can help you clarify your academic interests. Some can provide you with career advice. Some will show you the ropes during residency. The person you ask “What classes should I take?” most likely will not be the person you ask “Where should I apply for a residency?”

Ask and talk to others as you shop around for a mentor, then find out if he or she is a good emotional fit. A physician who may be a good mentor to your best friend in medical school may not be a good mentor to you. “You need to be completely comfortable and honest with your mentor,” Dr.

Vaughn said. “He or she has to be someone who reflects your values and sees your world as you see it, and someone you can go to when you have made a mistake.”

If a hoped-for mentor tests you to see whether you are a good fit, be sure to complete the test.

It is not unusual, said Dr. Vaughn, for a prospective mentor, at a first meeting, to ask you to read a particular book or complete a literature search to gauge how you work and think about things. Be sure to read the book, complete the literature review and follow up with him or her in a timely manner.

Have a written agenda. If you have scheduled a meeting with your mentor, make sure to send him or her an itemized list of issues you want to discuss a week in advance, said Dr. Vaughn. That way he or she can have time to mull over your concerns and not be caught unprepared. “This makes sure you make the most of both of your time,” she said.

Acknowledge your mentor’s help and guidance. Avoid fawning over your mentor, said Dr. Vaughn. Gifts and words of adoration are unwelcome. On the other hand, be sure to report back to your mentor when a piece of advice he or she has given to you has proven successful. As an example, Dr. Vaughn said, “a resident came to me because she was interested in becoming chief resident, but she doubted herself. I told her that she undervalued her skills and that she had what it took to achieve her objective. She recently came back to me and told me that our conversation was instrumental in her seeking out and becoming the chief resident. That was an amazing thing for me to hear!”

Above all, be honest with your mentor. If your mentor gives you an assignment that you believe does not align with your academic or professional goals—or, quite frankly, that you have no passion for—express your concerns, sooner rather than later. “A year into my fellowship, I realized that one of my research projects was something that was just not interesting to me,” recounted Dr. Vaughn. “I spoke to my mentor, who put me on another project and reassigned the original project to someone else.”

Likewise, talk to your mentor when there is something you don’t understand or when you think you have made an error. This is a really tough place to be in, Dr. Vaughn acknowledged, because “most of us have gotten as far as we’ve gotten because we’ve always been at the top of our classes. But we’re never going to be right 100 percent of the time. And we have to remember that this is not about trying to impress our mentors.”

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