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Commentary

Mentoring from the diverse lens of epidemiologists reveals a dynamic and mutually rewarding relationship

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On September 21, 2020 the ACE Mentoring Committee facilitated a panel discussion entitled: Dynamic Career Mentoring Across the Life Course Through the Diverse Lens of ACE Mentors. Three panelists with very different career experiences participated, including: Dr. Michele Forman, Dr. Stephen Waring & Dr. Jewel Wright in addition to the moderator, Dr. Angela Liese, Chair of the Mentoring Committee. Dr. Michele Forman is a distinguished professor, with experience working at diverse managerial levels in the Intramural program of NIH, CDC and in academia. Dr. Jewel Wright, an interdisciplinary scientist, has experience working in academia, the private sector, and multiple agencies within the federal government. Dr. Steve Waring is an epidemiologist and public health scientist with a breadth of experience from working in government, academic, and health care settings. Dr. Liese is a professor of epidemiology and has worked in academia her entire career. The panel discussed five questions followed by questions from the audience, among whom there were more than 35 attendees. The purpose of this communication is to highlight elements of the

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panel discussion as well as questions posed by the audience and responses received from the panel.

Question 1 addressed: *What are some of the key elements that have made for outstanding mentoring experiences and what are some of the lessons learned?*

Key elements for outstanding mentoring include: trust, time, commitment, communication, accessibility, energy, active support and awareness of expectations in the mentoring relationship.

Trust

Trust is the foundation and an essential requirement for all outstanding mentoring relationships. It is a precursor to the development of a rich mentorship experience. Trust is formed over time from building blocks framed by communication, commitment, and awareness of the primacy of mentoring in the career. It cannot be taken for granted, and needs attentiveness and energy. Trust needs to be nurtured throughout the mentoring timeframe and accepted as the responsibility of both the mentor and the mentee.

Time

Taking the time to craft and cultivate a relationship is paramount to the establishment of a successful mentor-mentee engagement. Important considerations that should be made prior to acceptance of a mentorship role include: sufficient time and availability, the mentor's career stage, the existing number of active

mentees, research and teaching load, and other service obligations beyond mentoring. It should be noted that availability alone is not a predictor of a successful relationship, rather, the mentor must dedicate sufficient time to provide the mentee with constructive and useful feedback. Setting expectations for the mentoring relationship is also critical to success.

Taking the time to listen to the mentee's needs is essential for a successful mentoring relationship. Needs may change as the relationship evolves. Accordingly, verbal and written expectations of the mentorship, frequent review of the expectations, and honest feedback about the mentoring plan, progress and relationship are fundamental to building an outstanding mentorship that is transparent and facilitates honest communication between the mentor and mentee.

Support and commitment

Active support of the mentee by the mentor through ongoing communications, assistance with goal setting, review of progress and exploration of mentee interests is critical for an outstanding mentoring experience. This active support by the mentor can also extend to thoughtful letters of reference; providing an opportunity to facilitate and advise the mentee in preparation for teaching, presentations, journal reviews of manuscripts and grantsmanship. Finally, it is important to listen to what is happening in the mentee's life, not just the career, to capture whether there is career and life balance.

Awareness of expectations

Knowing the expectations of the mentoring relationship is critical for success. Thus, addressing, at the outset, expectations of the mentor and the mentee, as well as, establishment of metrics for success and goals are key elements. Before deciding on a mentor, the mentee may develop a set of questions to identify a good mentor. The mentee may also have expectations about the desired mentor and seek to: define priority areas of focus during the mentoring experience and may request to talk with former/other mentees of the mentor in an effort to ascertain whether the mentor will be a good fit for him/her. After the mentee has identified the mentor, then the mentee may wish to develop a set of goals with the mentor. Alternatively, if the mentee is unsure of the next steps in her/his career; then, an open forum with the mentor, perhaps with questions outlined and shared ahead of time, will provide the opportunity to begin a fruitful mentoring relationship.

Among the *lessons learned*, the panelists mentioned that: (1) a good mentor should listen more and talk less; (2) neither the mentee nor the mentor should be afraid to leave a mentor/mentee relationship if issues or personality differences arise, expectations are not met, or it is simply time to move onto another mentor; (3) needs of the mentee should be the primary driver of the mentoring relationship; (4) the mentor should guide and assist a mentee who may be uncertain of their career path, and; (5) offer contact with others who can provide expertise or experience in an arena that the mentee is exploring. Finally, (6) successful mentors should be aware that mentoring is essential for everyone at all stages of the career lifespan and acknowledge the presence of mentors in their own network

One audience member asked: *How do you ask someone to be your mentor?* Here are some thoughtful responses by the panelists:

- Dr. Forman: be bold, state the desire to have the individual as your mentor, or go through a mentorship network to reach that person.
- Dr. Wright: share your interests - ask the person to have a conversation about a topic that you are interested in; ask them for an informational interview

- Dr. Waring: share your similar interests – a mentor will want to know why you would be a good mentee in their field; share why you see them as a good fit to be your mentor
- Dr. Liese: We are all passionate about our work, but there are so many things that define us outside of the field – you can simply get to know a potential mentor. The barriers to reaching out to another person should be very small.

Question 2 for the panelists was: *Since mentoring needs change over the life course, how has your mentor network adapted over time and do you prepare your mentees for changing mentorship needs?*

A mentoring network is a vital component of the career life course. It must be nimble and flexible. Networks should fit the mentee's life stage, not just the mentee's interests. Mentors can fill different needs at different points in time. Life experiences clearly influence whether a network member fits into the mentee's current stage. Sharing life events, personal likes, and issues challenging the mentee from his/her life outside the profession help to assess whether the mentoring network matches the mentee's needs. Foremost, the scope and focus of one's career can shape one's network, with the intent that the network will help the mentee formulate her/his interests into a goal.

The structure of a mentoring network may not be top down, rather it may include peer mentors and possibly a 360 approach that includes members from the highest level of the career hierarchy to those whom one mentors. Networks should, additionally, include mentors from diverse environments – from government, private sector, and academia, –because this allows the mentee to gain new experiences and profit from a broad spectrum of perspectives. Mentoring networks should not be gender specific, nor race-ethnic specific because diversity is enriching. Mentoring networks are successful when the mentee: focuses on specific questions or needs to individual network members, has a strong sense of personality commonalities and differences amongst the mentoring team, utilizes network members richly but sparingly, and makes changes (i.e. additions or subtractions) to the network throughout the career. Everyone across the career life course can benefit from a mentoring network.

Question 3 addressed: *How can a mentee exit a mentorship without burning bridges?*

No one wants to burn bridges. Ideally, a mentee should be upfront with the mentor – explaining his/her interest in exploring a different path or given a major career transition like tenure, prompting change in mentorship in the career. With open and transparent communication, a request for a change should be seen by the mentor as a natural evolution of the mentee's career. Helping a mentee transition to a new mentoring relationship can, in fact, be very rewarding.

Alternatively, a mentee can approach the department chair, branch chief, or college or other leadership to request a switch in mentors. This request will be facilitated in a supportive culture of the institution and its micro-environments, in which leadership communicates clearly and consistently that changes in mentoring are a sign of growth and development.

One question posed by the audience emanated from the second question and enlivened this panel discussion. Specifically, *How can mentees express thanks to their mentor?* Here are some thoughtful responses by the panelists:

- Dr. Waring: achieve your goal - mentors want to see you succeed and hear about your successes.
- Dr. Wright: update your mentors, share your successes - they want to hear about your victories.
- Dr. Forman: share what you have achieved, successes can be very different for each person.

- Dr. Liese: It is rewarding for mentors to hear that their mentees are happy, whether they are successes in their personal lives or their career.

Question 4 stated: *ACE strives to match mentees to mentors based on topic area and any demographic or geographic characteristics they request. What are some of the challenges when you mentor someone who is unlike you in terms of age, gender, race/ethnicity or other characteristics?*

A mentor and mentee can have very different backgrounds and represent diversity in culture, religion, language, country of origin, age, race/ethnicity and gender. Indeed, we all come from different backgrounds, and there is so much bi-directional knowledge that we can gain from each other. In essence, a mentoring relationship can offer the opportunity to learn from one another. Exploring what each person brings to the table, through experience sharing, is vital to understanding an array of perspectives. Historical and cultural differences can have vast impacts on a relationship, so mentors must ensure clarity of communication. Thoughtful consideration of potential demographic (e.g. cohort specific language) and cultural differences in communication may reduce obstacles in the relationship but require energy and commitment. Essentially, mentors should bring out the best and the hopes of a mentee for the mentee's future. Differences are opportunities for growth and can make for a very successful mentorship, so don't shy away from them!

Question 5 asked: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mentoring relationships and what are some of the challenges you are helping your mentees navigate?*

COVID-19 has greatly impacted mentoring and other relationships. Positive aspects include the creation of new opportunities and increased availability to create new linkages, mentors and mentor networks, and touch base with current contacts. Accordingly, it is evident that this is a good time to explore potential career changes – noting when job openings will become available again. The presence of additional time will allow interested parties to conduct research on future opportunities and be prepared to make a possible switch. Panelists noted that communication has become more intense, less trivial and, therefore, more impactful. Online communication, in particular, has opened up mentoring relationships, allowing individuals to share how they cope with life experiences, maintain work-life balance, and share emotional ups and downs. Ironically, people are now more open about their per-

sonal lives, but contend that working at home has led to a finer balancing act of one's personal and professional life. Thus, we are able to cherish moments, communicating more than we did before the pandemic.

Challenges related to COVID-19 are also plentiful. Unexpected shifts in work-life balance and shifts in the dominant utilization of online communication have caused significant stress on our society. In respect to exploration of new professional opportunities, we are beset with a changing job market; delays and cancelling of job positions have forced many people to put plans on hold. This requires a new socialization of job hunting and interviewing. We are reliant upon new technologies, such as zoom, which offer in-person interviews but lack the ability to detect non-verbal cues, observe body language and sense of the work environment. Another challenge arises from having to learn new methods of communication for work and school/teaching. Lastly, in-person studies have been pushed to hold status, leading to anxiety in meeting deadlines for tenure. The silver lining is that ample COVID-focused research funding is now available and institutions are exploring creative approaches to extending tenure clocks and possibly changes in the weight for different components in the criteria for advancement.

Overall, Panelists recognized that the “normal” has changed as a result of the pandemic. A “new normal” now exists, requiring adaptation to change. As with any change, the stress of transition and loss of familiarity must be acknowledged.

Closing Remarks:

In conclusion, panelists shared mentoring experiences from the diverse lens of academia, private and federal posts. They emphasized trust, energy, commitment and time as quintessential components for successful mentoring. Mentoring networks are enriched by diversity of gender, race-ethnicity, age and cultural backgrounds. They recognized the shifting focus of mentoring during COVID, due to learning new modes of communication and alterations in work-life balance. Panelists were also transparent about the pendulum swings of today's world filled with lost opportunities for in-person research but new chances for funding research and time for thoughtful consideration of future opportunities. It has always been evident that the mentoring relationship is dynamic. Today's challenges have transformed mentoring into a genre filled with greater energy, more impactful contact, and utilization of new tool kits for communication.