

Developing a Research Project: Selecting an idea and choosing a research mentor

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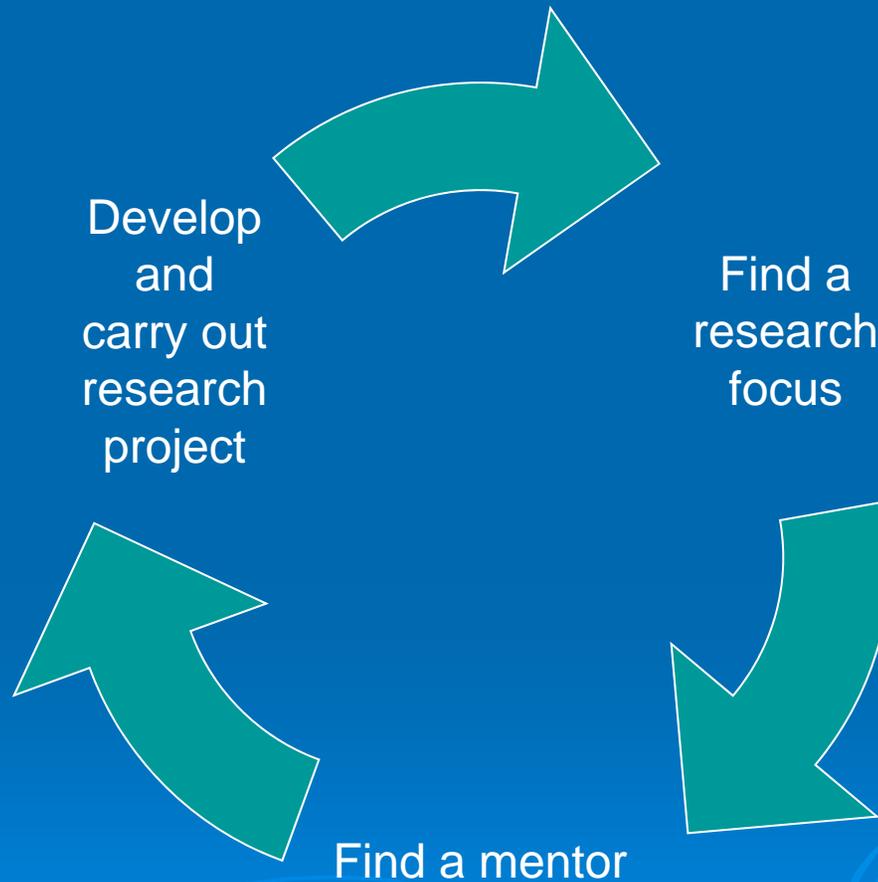


Outline

- Generating a research idea
- Finding a mentor
- Mentor-mentee expectations



Natural history of early research careers



Generating a research idea¹

- Picking a field (Locus)
 - Easier if you have a field or subspecialty
- Picking a question (Focus)
 - Is the question important?
 - The difference, to be a difference, must make a difference (Gertrude Stein)
- Assess feasibility
- Will this work in our healthcare system?
 - What others resources can I leverage?

¹Kroenke, JGIM 1996

More on feasibility

➤ Things to consider:

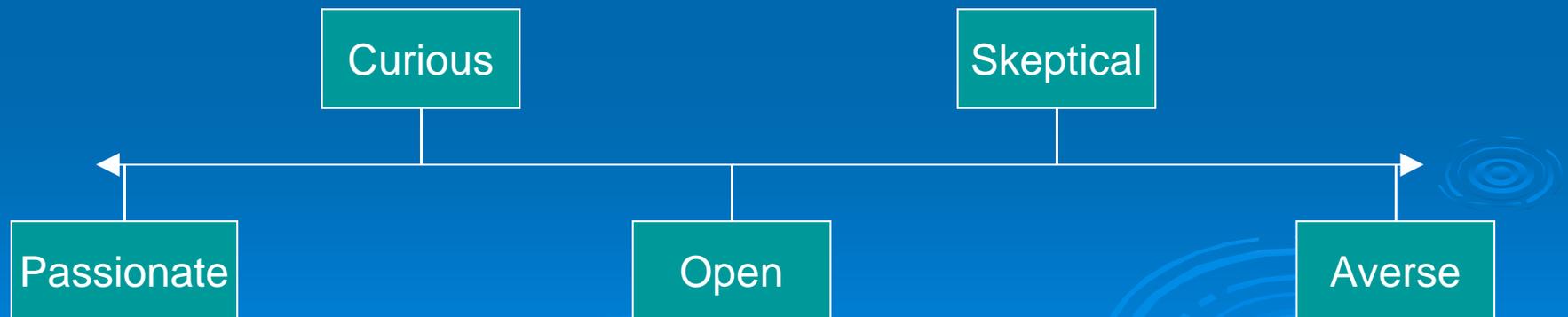
- How much time do I have?
 - Primary data collection projects are harder, take more time, but more valued
- Is there an existing database I can tap into?
- Is there an existing research team in need of a volunteer?
- Can you get funding?
 - More germane to sr fellow or faculty projects

What if you have a locus but no focus...

- Potential sources of research questions:
 - Mentors
 - Colleagues
 - Discussion sections of papers in an area of interest
 - Clinical work-patients!

Ideas suggested by others

- Mentors are a very good source of ideas, however..
 - Be sure to assess how *you* feel about their idea



My own trajectory

- Post-residency-early fellowship
 - “Women’s Health”
- Fellowship
 - Intimate partner violence-screening
 - One project, mentored, primary data collection
- First 10 years of my academic career
 - Violence in older women—identification, then health effects

And I am still evolving

- Cross campus collaborative efforts
- Serve as a content expert on jr faculty and post-doc projects
- Took big left turn and now involved with a big data project



Not all ideas work

- Sometimes they do not
- A good mentor will guide you away from an idea that does not work out (and should do so early)



On mentoring



What is a mentor?

➤ **–noun**

- a wise and trusted counselor or teacher.
 - an influential senior sponsor or supporter.
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- Odysseus's trusted counselor, in whose guise the Goddess Athena became the guardian and teacher of his son, Telemachus.

Forms of mentoring

- Classic model:
 - One on one
 - Work under supervision
 - Common in labs
- 'Newer' models
 - Multiple mentors
 - Often serve different, complementary needs
 - Peer mentoring

Choosing a mentor

- Need to have a high degree of self-awareness
- Clarify what energizes you
- Interpersonal preferences
 - Do you need a lot of praise and feedback?
 - OR
 - Do you prefer to try things first, for yourself?

Choosing a mentor

- Be clear on what you need
 - Methodological guidance
 - Specific guidance with a procedure, lab technique, analytical skill
 - Help with writing skills
 - Grantsmanship, paper edits
 - Navigating a new faculty position or academic center
 - All of the above or more!

Ideal mentor qualities

- Senior enough to guide
 - Degree of seniority driven more by experience, less by amount of grey hair
 - Sometimes someone a few years ahead can provide specific task related guidance that more senior folks cannot
 - I had an advisor for one of my grants who served in this role, now I do the same

Mentor qualities II

- Has published in the area you are interested in
- Is networked and can open professional doors for you
- Has time and interest



- Is secure enough to allow **you** to develop your own ideas
- *And is not looking to create 'Mini Mes'*
 - Chat with former trainees/mentees
 - Were there any authorship issues?
 - Who made decisions on trainee projects?

Where to look for mentors?

➤ Section

- The first place to start
- Common subject area

➤ Department or School

- Overlap areas—best methods expertise may lie outside your immediate work unit (or even department)

➤ Outside School

- Fellows often carry their mentoring relationships into faculty career
- Has proved rewarding for many

Reasonable expectations of mentors

- Available and accessible
 - Coaches and gives credit
 - Pays attention to both details and big picture
 - Role model for work-life
 - Provides opportunities
 - Recognizes potential
 - Inspires to take risks
 - Improves sense of identity, competence, self-awareness
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Common obstacles

- Perceived unavailability
- Fear of rejection
- Career indecision
- Trying to find an all in one mentor
- Paucity of senior mentors in your field

Overcoming roadblocks

- Persistence pays off
- Find more than one
 - Junior + senior
- Network in your professional organization
Often mentors may be found outside
your institution

Mentoring is a two way street



Mentee expectations¹

- Well organized
- Takes initiative
- Motivated
- Open to new ideas
- Seeks and incorporates feedback
- Respectful and considerate
- Follows up and stays engaged

¹Zerzan et al, Academic Medicine, 2009

Cultivating- managing up

- Articulate your needs
- Set your personal goals and stick to it
- Be responsive and available
- If there are issues..bring them up
 - E.g. Trouble meeting goals, have mentor help reassess feasibility
- Ask for feedback on progress
- Understand yourself and your mentor

Communication

- Ask mentor about preferred style
 - Recognize that some issues need face to face meetings regardless of style
 - Meet frequently but effectively
 - Come with an agenda, materials to review
 - Avoid defensiveness
 - Disagree when you need to—but with thoughtful, clarifying questions
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Dissatisfaction happens

- Mismatch of goals, expectations
 - On both sides
- Change in interest
 - Moving away from research, or from field
- Open communication is key



Termination of relationship

- Part of natural history
 - Career change
 - Change in location
 - Mismatch
- Part of pathway to independence
 - Once mentor, now colleague and friend



In summary

- Passion for research and a good mentor are critical ingredients for early research successes
 - Clinicians interested research often have and need more than one mentor
 - Knowing one's expectations (mentee, mentor) goes a long way towards building a good mentoring relationship
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