

Strategies for Success in Fellowship



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Internal Medicine subspecialty fellows across the continuum of their training should be aware of key strategies to gain the most out of their fellowship training. More than during any other time in a physician's training, subspecialty fellows are expected to be proactive, self-motivated, and self-directed in their own education and career development. Training programs provide unique opportunities to individualize a fellow's experiences with the goal of preparing each fellow for a specific career path. Identifying the optimal career path for a given fellow requires self-reflection and good mentoring. The successful launching of a career at the end of fellowship requires planning and time to ensure that individualized career-focused objectives and resources are provided during fellowship. Understanding key strategies for successful fellowship training is essential and can increase the likelihood of a successful and rewarding career.

The following sections outline principles that will benefit fellows at any level of their training, as well as after training ends. These strategies were composed and

refined through a modified Delphi process by current fellowship program directors from a diverse array of training programs. The authors also have national perspective on fellowship training because they serve together on the board of directors of the Association of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine Program Directors. The themes presented here reinforce one another but are independent principles. The list is not intended to be exhaustive but rather a collection of tips for fellows to consider, with no hierarchy intended or implied.

Take Responsibility for Learning

The practice of medicine requires life-long learning. To be successful in this regard, learners should be independent, self-motivated, and self-directed. Fellowship provides the perfect opportunity to create a learning agenda that is flexible and specific to individual professional interests and needs. In turn, this flexibility in educational planning will foster further intrinsic motivation and higher professional achievement. To make the most of these opportunities, fellows should incorporate habits of self-directed learning (Table 1).

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As the desire for autonomy grows and competency in key areas begins to develop, there will be challenges to this approach. Fellows build mutual trust with supervising faculty by providing evidence of competence and appropriate confidence. When necessary, expectations should be reinforced or clarified, and potential barriers to self-directed learning identified. Ultimately, creating strategies that encourage self-directed learning will facilitate the development of autonomy, competence, and a supportive learning environment, and thus the time is worth investing. Skills in this area are widely applicable throughout fellowship and set the foundation for success in many of the other areas noted.

TABLE 1] Tips for Incorporating Self-Directed Learning Into Fellowship Training

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take responsibility for learning that occurs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify specific learning needs and revisit these often
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set appropriate educational goals; seek the necessary resources and support to achieve them
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate self-reflection into the learning process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with program leadership to identify learning gaps and develop a flexible learning plan to address them
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline a plan for receiving feedback on progress toward learning goals

Keep an Eye on the Future

Early in training, fellows should begin to look ahead to their future careers, focusing on specific skills and experiences needed to become successful in their chosen path. The use of an Individual Development Plan provides the structured framework for defining 6- to 12-month goals, such as enhancing research skills and clinical knowledge, obtaining advanced procedural skills, learning about career options, and building a professional network specific to potential career choices. Through the process of self-reflection and collaboration with program leadership, fellows should begin to prioritize the skills that are most important to their success, recognize opportunities when they present themselves, and pursue the highest yield activities. Goal setting is also an important measure in reducing stress and limiting burnout.

Career development resources exist for many career tracks, including aspiring clinician educators, clinician scientists, and physicians focused on clinical practice. Because each path requires specialized focus and unique preparation, allocating the appropriate time and planning during fellowship is critical.

One aspect of keeping an eye on the future is to have a specific and detailed timeline for fellowship and to re-evaluate progress toward specific goals along this timeline on a regular basis. Fellows should keep track of their progress in a portfolio designed to demonstrate how they have pursued their specific goals. The Individual Development Plan, timeline, and portfolio should be reviewed regularly with a fellow's mentor(s) and program director to receive feedback, seek advice, and clarify further needs and expectations.

Have a Mentor

Mentorship is an invested, dynamic, and mutually beneficial professional relationship between a more

experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee. Tobin describes seven essential roles of a mentor: teacher, sponsor, advisor, agent, role model, coach, and confidant. Having a person, or sometimes multiple people, who can fulfill these roles is essential. Mentorship in medicine is associated with career success, greater career satisfaction, and better performance as faculty members at academic medical centers; thus, it is important for fellows to identify a mentor regardless of their long-term professional goals.

To identify an effective mentor, the fellow needs to look for someone with qualities associated with successful mentoring: honesty, availability, altruism, trustworthiness, approachability, and personal interest in the fellow's professional development. Once a mentor is identified, the success of the mentoring relationship is dependent on the mentor and the mentee. A successful relationship begins with mutual interests and compatibility. Sustained success will require consistent effort on the part of both mentor and mentee, and it involves the ability to respond to evolving needs, the establishment of clear expectations from both parties (Table 2), and a responsive feedback structure. The mentor's goal is to nurture the mentee's interest and foster success in professional endeavors. The fellow's goal is to earn and keep the mentor's trust while capitalizing on the mentor's guidance to build professional skills, connections, and an established niche. Accepting feedback, delivering on commitments, and respecting a mentor's time are actions that will earn the mentor's trust.

Engage in Scholarship

Active engagement in research and other forms of scholarship provides an additional opportunity for individualization of training and career development. Boyer expanded the traditional definition of scholarship beyond the science of investigation to include four essential components: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Examples from each of these categories can easily be found and matched to meet an individual's interests during fellowship: the scholarship of discovery advances knowledge (eg, participation in research); the scholarship of integration involves the synthesis of knowledge (eg, review papers or case series); the scholarship of application involves expertise in the application of existing knowledge (eg, development of national guidelines); and the scholarship of teaching involves peer-reviewed dissemination of knowledge (eg, curriculum development or web-based modules).

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