

## **How to Select a Mentor**

Postdoctoral training at the National Institutes of Health is critical to our mission, to prepare the coming generations of biomedical researchers. In the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), we want to ensure that every new postdoctoral fellow on campus, from the U.S. and from abroad, has the best possible research experience with us, leading to a productive scientific career.

The following questions and observations are designed to help you make your decisions thoughtfully and appropriately, as you consider training in one of our intramural laboratories.

### **What is a mentor?**

The best mentors are advisers who think about you, counsel you, and guide you.

They teach you, but they also challenge you to know yourself.

A mentor asks questions to help you define your goals.

A mentor shares knowledge.

A mentor encourages you.

A mentor inspires you.

A mentor thinks about your career goals, and how to help you reach them.

A mentor is someone you can trust.

One mentor may not meet all of your needs. Some mentors will be experts at skills such as writing, others will be very good at networking, and others will take an interest in your personal life and well-being. Not every mentor can be all things to you: sometimes, it's good to seek advice from others, as well. But your primary mentor, who most often will be your supervisor, is the main person who will support you during your time at NICHD/NIH.

### **What can I expect from a mentor?**

A mentor will work with you on your scientific development. This is his or her responsibility. A good mentor will:

- Meet with you, one-on-one, regularly
- Listen to you and to your ideas
- Teach you how to be a better scientist
- Provide constructive and timely feedback on your scientific work
- Support your growth through training opportunities, such as acquiring new lab skills or scientific expertise, grant writing, or public speaking
- Introduce you to scientific colleagues, so you may begin to develop networks of your own
- Recognize your contributions, for example through authorship on publications

### **What will a mentor want to know about me?**

Your mentor will have read your c.v. and letter of application, likely a statement of research interests too. In the interview, prepare to discuss (1) your science and (2) yourself.

- Be ready to talk about what you can offer to the lab (specific research skills, equipment with which you are familiar)

- What research ideas and questions are you interested in pursuing?
- What are your long-term goals? If you aren't sure, that is okay, but offer some ideas about careers you are considering and why.
- How do you manage time? Are you organized? Your mentor will want to know about your work ethic and how you will mesh with the team in the lab.

### **What should I ask in an interview?**

Identifying a lab which is a good fit for you, both scientifically and personally, is critical. The perfect research program for you is important, but so is working in an environment that will support you—your learning style, your need for independence versus your need for structure, how you like to work.

Don't forget to prepare carefully for the interview. Read about the lab on the web, and read the publications of the investigators in the lab.

Keep in mind your own values and goals, and ask questions accordingly. Examples are:

How do you communicate with your fellows, generally? (One-on-one, group meetings, and frequency)

What do you value most in a postdoc?

What will I typically be doing? (e.g., data gathering, analysis, input in lab meetings, experimental design)

What are the current research projects in the lab?

- What stage of completion are they at?
- What will I be working on?

Will I have an opportunity to:

- Pursue an independent project? If so, at what stage in my training?
- Collaborate with others?
- Train and teach others in the lab?
- Take courses or training programs?
- Attend scientific meetings?
- Speak about my research?

How will I be evaluated?

Where will I work?

Who are the other members of the research team in the lab?

What career path did you follow? Learn from your future supervisor's own story.

### **How do I know if I am making the right lab choice for me?**

- Ask your interviewer if you can talk with others in the lab. Why? Because you want to know:
  - How accessible your mentor is, to answer your questions and to meet
  - Whether the mentor answers e-mails from fellows
  - Whether you will have a chance to be a first author on a paper
  - If you will have a chance to work independently
  - If you will receive funds to take a course or go to meetings
  - What a typical day is like in the lab

- What the mentor's expectations are of fellows. How many hours a week someone is in the lab, usually
- Whether the mentor respects the postdocs in the lab, listens to them
- Think about how important independence is to you. Is this a lab where that is the norm? Or is loyalty, and following the research program defined by the mentor, valued more? Do you want close supervision and structure, or not? You want to learn in the best environment for you.

***The more you can learn about a research environment and the style of your mentor as well as his or her expectations, the better the fit, and the better your experience will be. If one person is not a good match for your goals and interests, it is likely that another scientist will be just right for you. It is worth it to take a little time to make an informed decision.***

#### **What will my responsibilities be, as a fellow in NICHD?**

It is up to you to make the most of what NIH, NICHD, your mentor(s), and your laboratory have to offer. The best person to define your future career is you. From the moment you arrive at NIH, you should be planning strategically for what is next—thinking about and then choosing a path that suits your skills, your professional and personal goals.

Many advisers in NICHD and at NIH will help you to obtain the training and experience you need: your mentor(s), your colleagues, our Scientific Director, and our institute's Office of Education.

***Take advantage of the career development resources in NICHD and at NIH to guide you. Start early. Don't wait until your last year of postdoc training to think about the future!***

***Show your interest, listen, work hard, be a good team member, communicate, stay focused on your goals, be a responsible and ethical member of the NIH community, and you will have a productive experience as a biomedical research fellow. Remember, too, to evaluate your own progress and to reflect on your future, because you are a unique individual with a unique path ahead of you.***