

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

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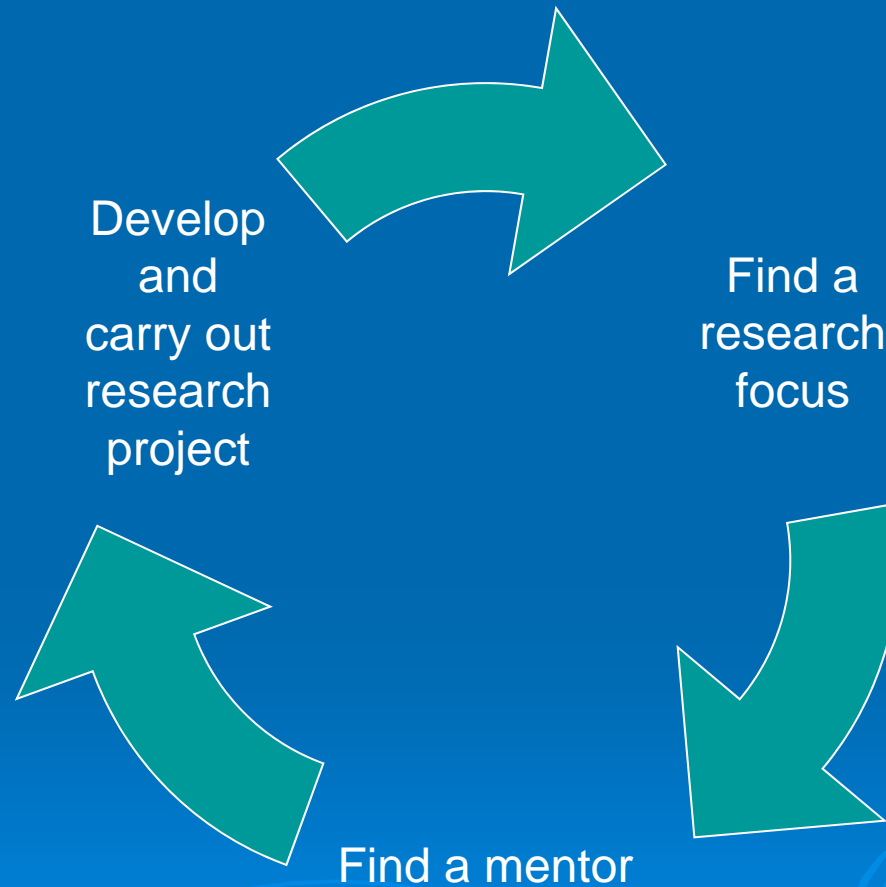
Section of General Internal Medicine  
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# Outline

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



# Natural history of early research careers



# Generating a research idea<sup>1</sup>

- 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?

<sup>1</sup>Kroenke, JGIM 1996

# More on feasibility

## ➤ Things to consider:

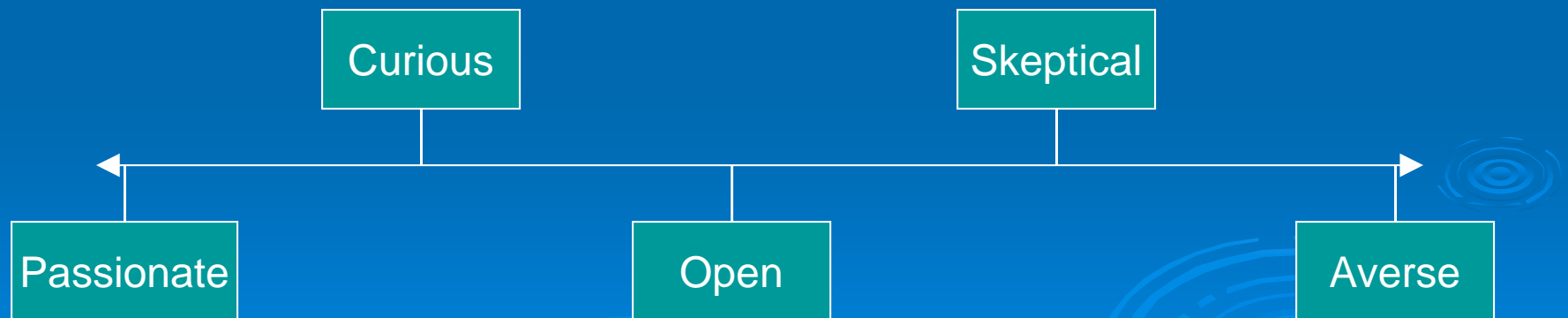
- How much time do I have?
  - Primary data collection projects are harder, take more time, but more valued
- Is there an existing database I can tap into?
- Is there an existing research team in need of a volunteer?
- Can you get funding?
  - More germane to sr fellow or faculty projects

# 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?
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# 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

# Common obstacles

- Perceived unavailability
  - Fear of rejection
  - Career indecision
  - Trying to find an all in one mentor
  - Paucity of senior mentors in your field
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# 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 expectations<sup>1</sup>

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


<sup>1</sup>Zerzan 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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