

Q&A: Early lessons on creating a Thesis Mentor Development Program at UCSF

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It the mentoring session at ImmunoSkamania, I boasted that I have answers to these questions. I don't have THE answers, but I have an answer to each question. And I'd be happy to answer more for you and everyone in a second posting if you email them to me. Here we go...

Why create a training program for faculty that mentor students and postdocs?

I regret not answering properly when Marion asked this question during our session at ImmunoSkamania! There are several reasons to create mentor training program:

- 1) For the faculty: Although we are all very busy professionals with many demands on our time, we do highly value mentorship (recall the near unanimity when Catherine Blish asked who in the ImmunoSkamania audience has had a great mentor), and hope to be good mentors for our trainees. Yet we spend very little time and receive very few resources to help us improve our mentoring skills. A faculty-led mentor development program can fill that gap in a way that respects faculty time and experience.
- 2) For the students: Students also recognize the value of good mentorship, and they are expecting us to be accountable for the quality of the mentoring climate at our institutions. This is a reasonable expectation! The UCSF Associated Students of the Graduate Division (ASGD; our student government) conducted a scientific survey of basic sciences graduate students to assess the mentoring climate at UCSF. Their findings indicated a high degree of satisfaction overall, yet several specific areas for improvement were uncovered. The ASGD recommended training for mentors *and* mentees, especially in the areas of communicating expectations, understanding student wellness, mentoring across differences (cultural competence).

Are we good stewards of our training programs and the excellent trainees to which we have access as scientific leaders?

We understand that providing excellent mentoring for all of our trainees is our responsibility as leaders of laboratories, programs, institutes and/or departments. In addition, the NIH (NIGMS in particular) has recently made it clear that they expect us to provide training for all mentors of supported trainees. If your NIH-supported training program does not have required mentor training for preceptors, you should start now to create a program!

What should be included in a mentor development program?

The ASGD survey indicated that, at UCSF, the following topics are critical:

- 1) Setting and communicating expectations.
- 2) Mentoring across differences; Fostering an inclusive lab culture.
- 3) Understanding and promoting student wellness and mental health.

Judging from my own discussions with other graduate program directors and training professionals beyond UCSF, these topics are of broad relevance at most

(all?) U.S. institutions. However, I do encourage you to include your trainees in the development of mentor training programs at your institution. There are *many* other topics worthy of further exploration.

What are the benefits of good mentorship (for the PI)?

Strong mentoring relationships are common marker of success in research. There is an obvious logical case and some empirical evidence that good mentorship translates into higher lab productivity and innovation. This can be a powerful motivating factor for faculty who are especially mindful of the efficient use of their time.

When and how much (is too much)?

At UCSF, we settled on the following: Within 2 years of accepting a student into their lab, each faculty member must complete the Sharpening your Mentoring Skills (SyMS) workshop (2.5 hours with lots of interaction among faculty participants. No coffee breaks!). Thereafter, they must take part in at least one mentorship development activity of their choosing each successive year. Failure to attend the SyMS workshop and participate in mentorship development activities will result in a ban from taking future rotation students until compliant. The program coordinator will track faculty participation and this information will be made available to all incoming students and to the BMS and/or DSCB Executive Committee for periodic program membership review.

The time commitment for our thesis mentor development program is not that great, and we try hard to make sure that the activities that we sponsor are worthy of the faculty time they consume. So far, the faculty response to the program has been generally very positive. Here is some very useful wisdom from Sharon Milgram, PhD, Director of NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education: “Ignore the naysayers and skeptics – there will always be some and they can suck the life out of any important initiative”

Who should engage in mentor development activities?

Everyone that oversees students and postdocs. Here is the message we send to UCSF faculty who are asked to participate: “The thesis mentor development program is open to everyone, but required for all BMS thesis mentors. We understand that you have many demands on your time, and note that our invitees include many of our program’s most distinguished, accomplished, skillful and mindful mentors. That’s great! Since there is no simple formula for being a good mentor, the success of this initiative depends on interaction between seasoned and new mentors in a mixed format that encourages meaningful discussion and exchange of ideas and effective practices. And we all have more to learn. Mentor training events are often aimed at postdoctoral fellows and transitioning junior faculty. The BMS Thesis Mentor Development Program is for everybody.”

How does one set up such a program? What resources will be needed? Who at your institution should help?

It's not complicated. Form a coalition of the willing, determine your objectives and the scope of what you hope to create (in the first phase, perhaps), do some fact-finding to determine what is already available or adaptable in your local environment, and do the work to fill the gaps. We really focused on the first event that all faculty must attend (SyMS). The first contact must be good enough to earn faculty buy-in.

It is critical that your team has one or more faculty champions (you?) who are involved in the organization and execution of the program, including communication about the program to faculty colleagues. If it is seen as a box-checking exercise from HR, it will very likely be unsuccessful. However, we benefited enormously from the engagement of professionals with expertise in designing training programs (e.g. from our Office of Career and Professional Development and the Graduate Dean's office). They helped us in the obvious ways (administrative support, experience teaching mentoring skills to students and postdocs) and unexpected ways (access to their networks of potential outside speakers and facilitators, experience with evaluating the effectiveness of workshops and training sessions). Working with your school/dean/academic affairs offices may also be necessary to scale and sustain the program if it is successful. Some financial resources may be necessary to bring in outside facilitators – think of each one as the cost of a seminar visit and it doesn't seem so bad. We did a lot of work with donated time from administrators from various places (especially our own graduate program coordinator and staff), but ultimately you should seek a budget for at least some part of an administrator's paid time to handle logistics.

Finally, I strongly recommend engaging students in the development of the faculty training. For us, they provided anonymous real-life scenarios from their fellow students that we could adapt for case studies, as well as energy and impetus for us to complete the work to develop the program.