Letter to the Editor

Advancing Professional Development Through Virtual Mentoring

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To the Editor:

Advances in technology have made it possible to communicate in real time with individuals, regardless of geographic location. With these advances, mentorship has taken on new forms, including virtual mentorship, which allows individuals in different networks to connect instantly. It is logical for pharmacists and trainees to leverage technology and embrace virtual mentorship as a viable mechanism of professional development and networking.

Numerous professional organizations, including the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) and the American College of Clinical Pharmacy (ACCP), offer opportunities for students and residents to connect with pharmacists across the country and electronically establish a mentoring relationship. It is easy to see the potential value this type of program offers to students and new practitioners who are interested in pursuing residency, developing their professional practice, or searching for other postgraduate opportunities as positions become increasingly competitive. The electronic mentor match programs allow students and new practitioners to create a profile, then search and request a specific mentor based on their professional interests.

Establishing a mentoring relationship with a stranger may feel uncomfortable for some, but the potential benefit is worth any transient uneasiness. One of the most valuable services a mentor can provide to a student or new practitioner is a different perspective. Having a mentor in a different region, institution, or area of practice encourages a mentee to consider alternative viewpoints and ways to accomplish tasks. For example, whereas one institution may teach a certain format for presenting a journal club, a mentor outside this environment may have a different method that offers the mentee an alternative way to convey the information. A different set of eyes on a curriculum vitae (CV) can give insight into whether the CV is descriptive

enough for individuals outside the school of pharmacy or health care facility's local faculty and preceptors who are familiar with the mentee's activities. In addition, a mentor who is external to the mentee's sphere of influence can be a tremendous resource for expanding the mentee's professional network. This connection could prove invaluable as the mentee applies for residency or employment, becomes involved in professional committees, or seeks to implement change in their school or workplace.

Similar to many other endeavors, the success of a mentoring relationship is contingent on a strong foundation being established on a clear purpose. The mentee should allocate time to reflect on what he or she would benefit from at that specific point in their career and identify genuine needs, which will fuel conversations with mentors. One of the most helpful conversations in establishing purpose is to discuss goals for the mentorship relationship. Although they will vary for each pair, common goals include the following: expand professional network, take steps to become a more competitive residency or employment candidate, and learn ways to prepare for residency applications and/or interviews. It is wise to make these goals as specific as possible, however, they should not serve as a checklist of tasks to complete. Rather, these goals should be expanded upon throughout the relationship in order to further strengthen the mentorship and benefits gained from the experience. The mentor may assist in the creation of additional goals and topics to discuss based on their understanding of the mentee's short- and long-term goals.

Mentorship is most often a process that continues over an extended period of time. By exchanging dialogue multiple times on important topics, the pair can ensure that a well-rounded and thoughtful discussion takes place. The most vital action a mentee can take is to ensure regular communication with the mentor. Taking initiative and being proactive in maintaining the connection is a sign to the mentor that the mentee seeks to optimize the relationship. Once

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the relationship is established, the longevity and success of the mentor-mentee relationship is largely dependent on the willingness of each party to remain in contact with one another. This is inevitably one of the most challenging tasks in maintaining mentoring relationships, particularly virtual ones. Even though a good mentor will continue to reach out, it is ultimately the mentee's responsibility to ensure regular communications with the mentor regarding issues the mentee would like to discuss or receive feedback on. To that end, there are a number of successful actions the mentee can take to derive the full benefit of the mentor-mentee relationship. The mentee should attempt to establish a yearly schedule with the mentor on various topics, some of which may include CV review and development, questions regarding residency training, and professional development within pharmacy organizations. The months leading up to the ASHP Midyear Clinical Meeting are prime for questions regarding the residency showcase and Personnel Placement Service, assisting the mentee with their residency or job search, reviewing a poster if presenting, or discussing ways to help the mentee prepare for the meeting. Meetings also offer the opportunity to coordinate a face-to-face conversation if the mentor and mentee will both be in attendance. Professional meetings are an ideal setting for the mentor to assist the mentee in networking, whether for a certain residency program, employment opportunity, or to expand the mentee's professional network.

Regardless of the time of year, mentees can maximize the benefit from mentoring relationships by actively sharing recent projects (eg, papers, presentations) and receiving feedback from the mentor. Additionally, this offers the opportunity for the mentor to share some of his or her work with the mentee and allow for a degree of modeling with regard to posters, presentations, manuscripts, or other work the mentor may have completed. This cultivates a level of personalization that is sometimes absent from many virtual mentor-mentee relationships. The two may share certain clinical or professional interests, leading to additional conversations and further strengthening of the relationship. Collaborations on projects or manuscripts may even be a possibility.

Mentorship can be a very rewarding experience and one of the most influential factors in professional development. Technology has made it possible for mentorship to occur in new forms that take advantage of both the diversity in pharmacy practice and geography. Opportunities for virtual mentorship exist that give pharmacy students and residents yet another mechanism to aid in their professional development.

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