



**AES 2021
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MEETING**

How to rely less on a sole mentor

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Disclosures

Speaker supports/believes in:

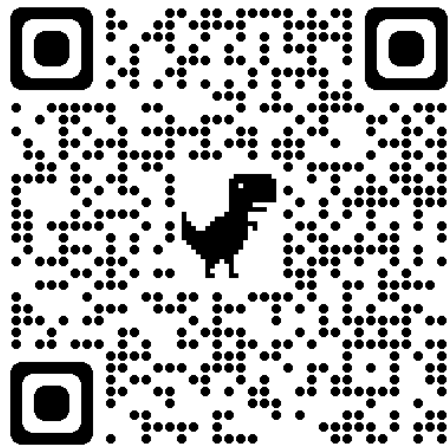
- Black Lives Matter
- #BlackinNeuro
- 🏳️‍🌈 Trans rights are human rights
- LGBTQA+ rights
- Opposes fascism

Learning Objectives

In this session we will discuss:

- The purpose of building a mentor network
- The value of a broad range of mentors
- Ways to identify/approach mentors
- How to get a mentor to mentor you

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session materials



Problem...

- (*at most places*) There is no system in place to set postdocs / residents / fellows up with mentors beyond their direct supervisor (1^o mentor)

Today we'll discuss...

- the *whys, whos, and hows* of building a mentoring network

Building a mentoring network

- Advancing a science career requires smarts, hard work, creativity, luck, **teamwork** and **HELP**
- Mentors can:
 - give an outside perspective on your science/work/app materials
 - give you insider perspective on: processes (e.g., recruiting/hiring), places, institutions/companies, people
 - talk you up within their network / expand your network

Why do you need *more* mentors?

- You NEED multiple letters of recommendation
- Different perspectives, different information than your 1° mentor
- Vastly increase your network of contacts
- *For when you and your 1° mentor don't see eye-to-eye*

Why do you need *more* mentors?

- There will necessarily be a time when your best interests are in opposition to your 1^o mentor's best interests

Unfortunately, this is usually when you're making plans to move onward/upward

- Good mentors know this, work with you toward meeting both your and their goals, but...
 - you need an outside perspective guiding you through this
 - someone who understands their side, but doesn't reflexively agree with them; can tell you when they are being reasonable or not

Where should you seek 2° mentors?

Maintain / renew old contacts

- **Your PhD advisor (or past mentor):** unless things went poorly, a letter of rec from them is almost a necessity
- Your dissertation committee: they already know you!
 - can speak to extra work/hardships you overcame during PhD
- If you've lost touch, just send them an email (like, today)... *people love to hear about the cool new things their mentees are doing*

Where should you seek 2° mentors?

Faculty

- Collaborators: great!
 - know you/your project very well
 - built in face-time
 - but... can be too close, to you *and to your 1° mentor*
- Within or outside your department; within or outside your institution
 - provide broader perspective
 - know people you/your 1° mentor don't already know
 - *someone speaking up for you who isn't directly involved with your work can carry more weight*
 - helpful to have some in, and some outside, your immediate field of study

Where should you seek 2° mentors?

Non-faculty

- Industry - pharma, biotech, data/analytics
- Advocacy / NGO (AES, CURE, DSF, they're all here...)
- Academic / Research Administration
- Publishing / writing / science communications (staff working on every journal you... read...)
- Policy
- Governmental (NIH, NSF, but also FDA, USDA, etc.)

All of these people are scientists, went through what you're going through, know the workings of academics AND the system they now work in!

How to find/identify mentors

Science is a small world, you're probably only 2-3 connections from a perfect mentor you never knew you needed!

- **Work your network**: ask friends, colleagues, then ask their connections...
- Exhibitors at conferences
- Social media
 - set up specific professional accounts, then use them (post, follow, DM), update them
 - LinkedIn: lame but absolutely necessary
- Don't be afraid to put yourself out there, say exactly what you're looking for

How to approach mentors

but first... why would they want to be a mentor?

Feel nervous about approaching someone? Feel like you're burdening them? Don't!

- Talking to other scientists is fun, especially when low stakes!
- Being asked advice makes us feel smart, respected, appreciated, important
- You're asking for something that is both easy and impactful
- You're giving us a break from _____. (budget making, committee meetings, curriculum design, grant review, etc)

You're giving us a pure shot of dopamine! TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THAT

How to approach mentors

Most people like mentoring and will want to mentor you!

Keep initial approach short and sweet

- Tell them:
 - who you are
 - how you're connected, how you found them
 - why you're specifically interested in them
 - looking to make connections
 - your biggest question for them
 - are they willing to have an informational interview? (up to them: phone, zoom, etc)
- Always follow up if they don't respond, but don't pester, don't take it personally if you don't hear back
- **Always send a thank you after a meeting**

How do you get mentors to *mentor* you?

- ***Don't leave it up to their initiative, tell them what you need!***
- Set up meetings specifically for mentoring (not just after you talk data)
- Give them specific topics / questions in advance of the meeting
- Lead the meeting: pointedly bring up each of your topics (don't let their tangents derail you!)
- Meet/remain in touch regularly, at appropriate frequency, not just a week before you need a letter of rec
- Always follow up meetings with a (succinct) email
 - Reiterate main discussion points
 - Re-ask outstanding questions
 - ***Remind them of their specific action items***

Active steps to take... right now!

1. Go talk to people at this meeting!

- Ask them what steps they took to get where they are
- Ask them what types of mentors they had
- Ask them if you can be in touch in the future

2. Make an individual development plan, identify your specific goals and needs

- *in what areas could you use more mentoring or a new mentor?*

3. Set up a meeting with your current 1° and any 2° mentors to specifically discuss:

- your near-term goals and what you need & need to do to accomplish them
- what you need from them to reach those goals
- who they suggest as additional mentors, based on your goals

4. Make an appointment with your university's Career Services center

Resources

- Association for Women in Science - [AWIS.org](https://www.awis.org)
- National Postdoctoral Association - nationalpostdoc.org
- National Research Mentoring Network - nrmnet.net
- Individual Development Plan - myIDP.sciencecareers.org

Networking notes from an introvert

If you're a shy introvert (like me), conferences and networking can be a challenge, but... it is something you **have** to do. So, develop some strategies!

- Find your extrovert labmate or that person who seems to know everybody (thanks Bobby!), and specifically ask if you can stick with them at an event to meet people
- Set yourself goals (meet 3 new people; stay until 8:53pm)
- Plan out how to introduce yourself ("Hi, I'm MacKenzie Howard, I've had my lab up and going at UT Austin for almost 5 years now, I'm really interested in synaptic integration and plasticity in epilepsy, what about you?")
- Embrace the meta! Everybody is going through the same thing, you can talk about exactly what you're doing: "I'm new to the field and am trying to get to know people, how long have you been doing this?"; "I'm such an introvert, these events are such a challenge, do you find this hard too?"

Networking notes from an introvert

Faculty can feel hard to approach, especially when we're already in a conversation, but sometimes you just have to do it. **Know that often we're happy to have someone new to talk to**

- Have strategies for joining an ongoing conversation:
 - Wait for a pause, succinctly introduce yourself, say you've been excited to fit a face to the name on the papers you've been reading
 - You can explicitly mention what you're doing: "Sorry to cut in, but I'm getting into the field and you're exactly who I wanted to meet, so I had to say hello"
 - Get their conversation back up and going again. To the person who was speaking, ask a follow up to what they were saying, or ask the person who wasn't speaking what they think about what was just said
 - Beware walking up to an ongoing conversation and lingering too long without introducing yourself. Better to politely interrupt than to lurk.

Networking notes from an introvert

- Have strategies for keeping conversations going:
 - Practice reflective listening! Ask a question based on what a person just told you
 - When asked questions, answer and then reflect the question back on the asker. Don't answer a question then just wait for them to keep things going
 - Answer more than just the question someone asks you, give them something more ("So, you're using knockout mice?"; "Yes. They're a great model for this disorder and I love imaging hippocampus. They aren't perfect because of XXX but I really think it would be cool to follow up my YYY findings with ZZZ model/technique...")
 - Bring someone nearby into the conversation, introduce yourself *and the person you've been talking to* to them
 - Have a few evergreen topics/questions in mind in advance that you could ask anyone about

Networking notes from an introvert

Have strategies for *leaving* conversations and go **before** it gets awkward

- Tell them how you appreciate meeting them, use their name, reiterate something they said that you found interesting
- Embrace the meta: “I have go mingle, I told myself I’d meet three new people tonight.”
- DON’T LET SOMEONE MONOPOLIZE YOU. If you’re uncomfortable or not enjoying the conversation it isn’t doing you or them any good. If you think an exit is going to feel awkward regardless of doing it sooner or later, don’t wait, just say your line and go!
- Some of my emergency exit lines:
 - (Carry an empty cup) “So happy to meet you but I’m absolutely dying for some water”
 - “Oh, my labmate just walked in and I have to check in about a mouse issue”
 - “Its school/bedtime at home, I have to do a quick facetime.”
 - You can walk out of an event, “do something” for a few minutes, then come back in and not rejoin the same group

Networking notes from an introvert

Other thoughts:

- Don't cluster with your labmates for too long
- Enjoy yourself; **don't drink too much**
- Limit phone scrolling: fake phone calls are a transparent and not great way to leave a conversation; if at an event, step out of the room to look at your phone; checking your phone can provide a cognitive break, but set a timer and make yourself get back to human interaction
- Never misgender people
- Avoid guessing someone's rank, i.e., grad student/postdoc/faculty (Awkward: "Whose lab do you work in?"; "Uh... mine.")



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