

Mentorship in Residency

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RESIDENT PEARLS

- Mentorship can help residents refine their clinical skills, navigate the complexities of patient care, engage in research, and connect with professionals in their field.
- The effects of mentorship in residency extend well beyond the training years, as mentors often become lifelong guides and professional advocates for their mentees.

The year was 2023, and I was on my way to the American Academy of Dermatology meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana. “Geaux Tigers!” I exclaimed to a stranger as she walked by in her purple and gold shoes and scrubs. We chatted for a minute or two about Louisiana State University (LSU) football, then went our separate ways. Later that day, in the hands-on wound closures workshop, I was surprised to see my new acquaintance step up to the podium to lecture, then make rounds across the room to instruct residents. I didn’t know it at the time, but those purple and gold shoes sparked a conversation with a fellowship program director who would become one of my most valued mentors.

I didn’t set out to find a mentor that day—I simply was excited to connect with a fellow Tigers fan. But mentorship often finds us unexpectedly, and that encounter serves as a reminder that mentorship doesn’t always start in a formal setting. Sometimes it begins with a quick conversation in the right place at the right time. This story is one of many experiences that taught me valuable lessons about mentorship—its importance, how it can grow naturally, and the impact it can have.

Residency is a pivotal time in a physician’s life, filled with rapid learning, complex challenges, and new professional relationships. Amidst the long hours and heavy responsibilities, mentorship stands out as a support system for guiding residents toward professional and

personal growth. Herein, I share more about my experiences with mentorship in residency, the lessons I have learned, and how they can serve as guidance for residents.

The Value of Mentorship

Mentorship in residency has been shown to have a major impact on career satisfaction, clinical confidence, and professional development.¹ A good mentor offers more than just advice—he or she can provide a model of professionalism and skills that resonates with the mentee’s own aspirations. Mentorship can help residents refine their clinical skills, navigate the complexities of patient care, engage in research, and connect with professionals in their field.²

Mentorship can be sought intentionally or arise naturally from shared interests and connections. Some residents reach out to potential mentors directly through emails, set up one-on-one meetings, or shadow them to gain firsthand experience. Others find mentorship simply by putting themselves in situations that foster these connections, such as attending conferences or lectures. Both approaches can lead to impactful relationships that shape a resident’s career and personal growth.

For residents involved in research, an effective faculty research mentor is particularly impactful. Studies show that residents who work with knowledgeable research mentors are more likely to experience success and productivity in their research efforts.³ Research mentors can provide essential guidance—from helping formulate research questions to navigating the complexities of publishing—which makes them invaluable in a resident’s academic development.

If you have interests in specific areas not heavily emphasized within your residency program (eg, transplantation dermatology, hair restoration, cutaneous lymphoma), consider checking within your broader medical community for specialists. Many dermatologists and other specialists welcome the opportunity to mentor residents who express a sincere interest in learning. By reaching out to these professionals, you not only expand your clinical knowledge but also gain access to niche areas

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of dermatology that can shape and refine your future practice. Often, these experiences lead to invaluable mentorships that may otherwise be unavailable within your immediate training environment.

Networking Through Professional Society Rotational and Mentorship Programs

The Women's Dermatologic Society (<https://www.womensderm.org/>), the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (<https://www.asds.net/>), and the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery (<https://www.aslms.org/>) all provide excellent formalized mentorship or preceptorship programs. Check their websites for application requirements and timelines. Participating in these programs is a great way to network with experts in dermatology, providing a structured way to interact with physicians who share your interests. Whether you are interested in medical dermatology, surgery, pediatrics, dermatopathology, or cosmetics, there are many mentors who greatly enjoy sharing their knowledge and experience with residents. Oftentimes, these programs include stipends to assist with costs that are awarded as accolades that can enhance your curriculum vitae. Engaging in these recognized preceptorship programs often builds lasting connections and ensures that both mentor and mentee have a vested interest in the relationship's success.

Making Connections at Conferences and Maximizing Hands-on Learning

Professional conferences offer valuable opportunities to connect with mentors, whether you are proactively seeking mentorship or simply allowing connections to happen naturally. Conferences such as those of the American Academy of Dermatology and American Society for Dermatologic Surgery publish educational booklets and schedules online prior to the event, giving you a chance to explore both topics and speaker names ahead of time. This can be an excellent opportunity to create a day-by-day game plan, identifying sessions and lectures of interest as well as specific authors or experts you might like to meet. Planning in advance makes it easier to engage with leaders in the field, introduce yourself, and make meaningful connections.

Oftentimes, these society meetings offer hands-on courses, which are a great way to meet mentors and learn from direct instruction. Instructors for these courses often are leaders in dermatology who are passionate about teaching. With small group sizes, hands-on courses offer both technical skill-building opportunities and a chance to connect personally with instructors. Take a moment to introduce yourself and engage in a quick conversation, and if you feel it is appropriate, follow up with an email after the conference. This helps keep the connection alive beyond the event and may open doors for future mentorship opportunities.

Away Rotations

For residents looking to build specialized skills and connect with mentors outside their own program—especially

those considering fellowship—away rotations can be a great tool. Though it may require using vacation time, an away rotation offers immersive learning in a particular area while providing opportunities to observe new mentors and establish relationships within a desired subspecialty or program. By simply reaching out and expressing interest, residents can connect with physicians who may become lasting mentors and advocates.

Building a Mentor-Mentee Relationship

A meaningful mentor-mentee relationship requires time, effort, and effective communication, with clear expectations around mentorship goals, time commitments, and how both parties envision the relationship evolving.⁴ Ideally, mentees should feel comfortable sharing their goals with mentors and asking for feedback. In the right context, a simple and effective practice is to send your mentor a brief update on your progress every few months. This could be a quick email sharing your latest projects, ideas, and/or achievements. By regularly checking in, you show your mentor that you are committed to growing from their guidance and respect their time.

The Lasting Impact of Mentorship

The effects of mentorship in residency extend well beyond the training years, as mentors often become lifelong guides and professional advocates for their mentees.⁶ Residency often is the last time a resident trains under the direct supervision of an attending physician, making it a unique and formative period. After graduation, many new physicians find the transition to independent practice challenging, and the "real world" can be a shock. Having a mentor during this time, or maintaining connections with mentors from residency, can be invaluable. Mentors can offer advice, act as sounding boards, and remind new graduates of the importance of being lifelong learners. These relationships help ease the transition into practice, instilling a commitment to continuous improvement and professional growth. For me, a conversation about LSU football at the AAD meeting in New Orleans exemplifies how mentorship can begin in the most unexpected ways. That casual exchange led to an away rotation, a fellowship interview, connections at national meetings, and the start of what I hope will be a lifelong friendship.

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