

## Leadership & Professional Development: From Seed to Fruit—How to Get Your Academic Project Across the Finish Line

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*“Our goals can only be reached through the vehicle of a plan. There is no other route to success.”*

—Pablo Picasso

Whether it be a research manuscript, quality improvement (QI) initiative, or educational curriculum, busy clinicians often struggle getting projects past the idea stage. Barriers to completion, such as a busy clinical schedule or lack of experience and mentorship, are well known. Importantly, these projects serve as “academic currency” used for promotion and advancement and also create generalizable knowledge, which can help others improve clinical practice or operational processes. Those who are successful in completing their academic project frequently follow a well-structured path. Consider the following principles to get your idea across the finish line:

**Find a blueprint.** Among most academic projects, whether a research paper, QI project or new curriculum, an underlying formula is commonly applied. Before starting, do your background research. Is there a paper or method that resembles your desired approach? Is there a question or concept that caught your eye? Using a blueprint from existing evidence allows you to identify important structures, phrases, and terms to inform your manuscript. Once you have identified the blueprint, define your project and approach.

**Find a mentor.** While career mentorship is important for professional growth, you first need a project mentor. Being a project mentor is a smaller ask for a more senior colleague than being a career mentor, and it’s a great way to test-drive a potential long-term working relationship. Moreover, the successful completion of one project can potentially lead to further opportunities, and perhaps even a long-term career mentor.

**Take initiative.** In business, there is a common adage: “Never bring a problem to your boss without a proposed solution in hand.”<sup>1</sup> In academics, consider: “Never show up with an

idea without bringing a proposal.” By bringing a defined proposal to the conversation, your inquiry is more likely to get a response because (a) it is not a blind-ask and (b) it creates a foundation to build on. This is analogous to an early learner presenting their assessment and plan in the clinical setting; you don’t stop at the diagnosis (your idea) without having a plan for how you want to manage it.

**Get an accountability partner.** Publicly committing to a goal increases the probability of accomplishing your task by 65%, while having an accountability partner increases that by 95%.<sup>2</sup> An accountability partner serves as a coach to help you accomplish a task. This individual can be a colleague, spouse, or friend and is typically not a part of the project. By leveraging peer pressure, you increase the odds of successfully completing your project.

**Carve out dedicated time.** The entrepreneur and author Jim Rohn once said, “Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments.”<sup>3</sup> To complete a project, you have to make the time to do the work. While many believe that successful writers sit and write for hours on end, many famous writers only wrote for a few hours at a time—but they did so consistently.<sup>4</sup> Create your routine by setting aside consistent, defined time to work on your project. To extract the most value, select a time of the day in which you work best (eg, early morning). Then, set a timer for 30 minutes and write—or work.

Because you are a busy clinician with constant demands on your time, having the skillset to reliably turn an idea into “academic currency” is a necessity. Having a plan and following these principles will help you earn that academic coin.

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