

AWAEM's Professional Development Series

A Guide to the First Two Years of your Career

By Stephanie Abbuhl

It's a pleasure to share with you some tips about how to start off the first few years of your academic career in the most productive, rewarding and enjoyable way possible. I offer here some guidance gleaned from the literature, personal observations, mistakes I've made, and experience mentoring and working along side wonderful colleagues in Emergency Medicine over a fair number of years. An academic career should be a long distance run - with all the satisfaction of a marathon well done – and it helps to get it started with a good strong run. So lets start the journey!

Step 1: Take an Inventory

It starts here...coffee, tea, diet coke or whatever suits the fancy of your colleagues...take them out individually for a chat. Meet with everyone in your department, or almost everyone, as a part of key information gathering. This should preferably be out of the office and will begin your inventory of who does what in your department. Talk to junior and senior faculty, key administrators, nursing leadership. Find out who's doing what by asking lots of questions and doing a lot of listening. *What do they like most about their careers? What do they wish was different? How did they start out? What valuable lessons can they share with you?* Most people love to tell their story so they will appreciate a chance to reflect on their lives

By learning how your colleagues spend their time, you will begin to understand the context of your initial career, which is so important to figuring out how you will fit in and thrive. You will be finding out the various pathways to success in your department and in your institution – and there are almost always many paths.

Step 2: Find Your Passion

If there was one thing I wish I had appreciated early on in my career it would be this: the more you are motivated by a higher purpose beyond just advancing your career, the more likely you are to be successful and poised



**Some people
dream of success
while others wake up
and work hard at it.**

to make a difference. This is what is invigorating and keeps you in the game year after year. It sounds simple, but all too often, a junior faculty member hasn't yet found their true niche – the one they can really get excited about.

Discover your own calling, where your interests really lie. Don't let others decide this for you. It's easy to get lured into an area of concentration where a mentor or senior colleague is working or to find yourself working on a topic that was handed to you to meet a hospital mission or department need. These can sometimes lead to true interests, but if not, don't get stuck there. Start over with an area meaningful to you

If you really care about your area of expertise you will be successful -- It will be less like work, and more like having a purpose.

Step 3: Assemble Your Mentors

Mentoring has been the buzz word of faculty development for the past decade, and for good reason. Good mentoring relationships are associated with a higher likelihood of academic success and more career satisfaction.

Before you seek a mentor, a few introspective steps are necessary: 1. Think

about your values, your work style and your needs. 2. Identify your goals (research, teaching, writing, speaking, clinical, and often some combination). 3. Identify who can guide you to those goals.

Over time you will build a team of mentors, however be patient. This doesn't happen overnight, and there are often challenges. As you build your team, consider having at least one mentor in your department and at least one outside your department (in another department at your institution, or at another institution). Consider senior and junior mentors. Someone just a little ahead of you can be very helpful as you navigate your course.

I often like to think about having two kinds of mentors: a content mentor (someone who guides you specifically in your topic area) and a career pathway mentor. The latter helps with the big picture and establishing priorities; balancing work and personal life, negotiation, politics, overcoming career disappointments, finding longevity).

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“First Two Years” continued.

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There’s no question that the single most important part of getting great mentoring is getting in the driver’s seat and driving the bus. This is managing up, taking responsibility for your own development by organizing and leading the mentee work you will do with your mentor:

- Make the appointments
- Develop an agenda for each meeting, send manuscripts or other written work in advance
- Ask for honest feedback; try not to be defensive
- Show appreciation

AND MOST IMPORTANTLY...

- Follow through with your tasks

If you assume this much responsibility for the mentoring relationship, I can just about promise you that it will be successful.

Step 4: Find a Posse

Who are your teammates for writing & research? Don’t go it alone. Collaborating with colleagues is key, not only because they bring the variety of talents you need to do great scholarship, but also to just make the process more fun. It’s really hard to succeed as a soloist. You need to take turns among a

group, sharing first authorship, sharing the more mundane tasks, sharing in taking the lead for organization. Again, be open to outside collaboration (other disciplines, other institutions, colleagues from national organizations). Competition can sometimes be an unspoken barrier within a department and often some of the most successful research and writing groups are with colleagues from outside.

Step 5: Write It Down

The fifth strategy is all about formulating, committing to, and writing down your goals. The process of writing down goals has been shown to increase the likelihood that you will actually take concrete steps towards meeting those goals.

Make one and 3-5 year plans: 3-year goals if you are very early in your first appointment; 5-year goals if you are farther along.

It’s important to set achievable goals. Be realistic and ask your mentors to help with this. Break down each goal to specific action steps and identify timelines to help you achieve them. This will be a dynamic process; your goals will change and sometimes its okay to drop some – often one has to do less to do more.

Not only should you review your goals with key mentors but you should add personal, family & community goals to your list. You cannot plan work goals

in a vacuum, and if you do, you may end up burning out. Reassess your goals regularly:

- What keeps you up at night?
- What are the nagging anxieties or stressors that take away from your enjoyment of work?

AND

- What makes you lose track of time?
- What are the activities you really enjoy that make work seem more fulfilling?

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Passion is energy.
Feel the power that comes
from focusing on what
excites you.
– Oprah Winfrey