The Ins and Outs of Choosing a Mentor

Rick McGee, PhD
Northwestern University,
Feinberg School of Medicine

Sounds simple until you try to do it…

Overall goals for this session….

- Improve your ability to choose the best lab and mentors for you
- Improve your ability to get what you need from mentors
- Improve your ability to serve as a mentor for others
- Review important considerations for how you can most effectively use mentors and other professional development options

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

How many of you…

- Came here already planning/committed to working with a specific faculty mentor?
  - How did you arrive at your decision?
  - How confident are you that it will work out well?
- Came here with a pretty good idea of who you want to work with?
- Came here with a clear field of interest but not a clear idea of who to work with?
- Came here undecided about field and person?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Mentoring stories…

- Briefly share some of your most positive experiences with scientific mentors
- How about horror stories you or others you know have experienced?
- How common do you think mentored experiences are positive vs. not so positive?

NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

What questions do you ask a PI when you are considering his or her lab?

- What are you really trying to find out for each question?
- Are you listening for specific answers – i.e. do you know what you are looking for?
- How is this different from a general conversation? Think of it as you interviewing a potential mentor!

NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

Basic questions to ask a PI when you are considering his or her lab

- What research projects are currently going on in your lab?
- Have you been working on these for a long time or are they new? Do you anticipate any new directions in the next few years?
- Do people tend to have their own, distinct projects or do people work together?
- Do you have a philosophy about graduate students and postdocs working on high risk/high payoff vs. lower risk/lower payoff projects?
- What is your policy about attending scientific meetings with or without presenting abstracts?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

More questions to ask a PI when you are considering his or her lab

- How many and what kind of people do you have in your research team right now? Is this about what you usually have?
  - Is it a big, medium or small group?
  - Would you have enough others to work with and learn from?
  - Will you be the only PhD student? Good or bad?
  - Is their research support declining or growing?
- Do you like to work closely with your graduate students or prefer they be quite independent?
  - What kind of answers do you think you would get?
  - What would you like to hear?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

More questions to ask a PI…

- If I was to join your lab would you like me to work on one of your current projects or start a new one?
  - What answer do you hope to hear?
  - What are the pros and cons of each?
  - Could a answer be ‘both’?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

What questions do you ask others in the lab or in addition to the PI?

- Has the PI been working on the current areas of research for a long time or are they new? How is progress going overall?
- Do people tend to have their own, distinct projects or work together?
- What is the overall atmosphere in the lab like?
- How does the PI react if people come up with new ideas they would like to try?
- How does the PI react if someone disagrees with her or challenges her ideas?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

What questions do you ask others in the lab or in addition to the PI?

- Does the PI travel a lot? Is s/he accessible when away?
- What's it like to write a paper or a grant with the PI?
- How long do most students take to finish the PhD?
- About how many papers are published each year?
- Are people encouraged to attend meetings and give research talks/posters?
- Are you glad you joined the lab? Would you do it again?
- What is best and worst about being in this lab?
- If there was one thing you could change in the lab, what would it be?

What else do you find out about a PI?

- Publication record – long-term and recent – look for patterns of graduate student and postdoc publications
- Current funding level and any recent changes
- When major grants will have to be renewed
- Overall ‘reputation’ among grad students and postdocs – don’t put too much weight on one opinion however

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Think about…

- In your experiences, what determines the quality and quantity of mentoring?
  - Mentor-dependent issues
  - Trainee-dependent issues
- Many uncontrolled idiosyncrasies in mentor-based training, especially compared to professional education like medicine or law

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Strengths of mentor-based training

- High ability to match interests and styles of mentors and trainees
- Great flexibility in adapting to different starting points and evolution rates of trainees
- Relationship can evolve from dependent to independent to colleague
- Maximizes variety of outcomes – no two will be alike – *not unlike natural selection*
- Mentors usually can balance time required with other responsibilities – maybe…

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Strengths of mentor-based training

- Done right, both parties benefit
- Potentially, a great deal of personal as well as professional sharing
- Others?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Challenges in mentor-based training

- Unspecified details of what is to be achieved and transmitted from mentor to trainee
- Requires a lot of communication that may or may not happen easily
- Not easy to ensure everyone is on the same page
- Mentors may have ‘grown up’ in very different era
- Hard to mentor toward something you have not done before – big impact recently
- Huge variations in what is provided

NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

More challenges in mentor-based training

- Goals and priorities of mentor and trainees may differ dramatically
- Mentor time demands and life realities may not mesh with trainee needs
- Mentors play dual training/support and evaluative roles
- Historically, little direct reward for time and expertise of mentors in academia

NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

Competing/conflicting interests inherent in mentoring….

- “For a graduate student, I expend all of my energy teaching them and just as they get good they leave – I can get a bigger return on my investment by keeping them longer!”
- “If I give her latitude to come up with her own ideas and directions, it can easily pull resources away from getting the results I need for my grant renewal. She might hit a new idea but can I take the risk?”

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Think of it as choosing a community, not just a mentor

- Every lab is really a community with lots of different community behaviors – the faculty PI is only one element of the equation
- Communities have their own obvious and not so obvious patterns of behavior – you need to consider these as much as the PI
  - How transparent are the ‘rules’ of the group?
  - How well is group knowledge passed on to newcomers – like you?
  - Does it feel like a community you want to join?

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Issues for YOU to consider in getting the most out of mentoring

- Be proactive – you can't afford to wait for someone to reach out to you
- Consciously and carefully think through what you want from mentors
- Be concrete and explicit – spell out what you would like from a mentor and find out what s/he expects or can provide to you
- Once you hit postdoc stage (if not before), seek out multiple mentors for different pieces of what you need
- Expect to need mentors well into your professional career - at some point they become 'colleagues'
- Communicate, communicate, communicate

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Whose responsibility is it?

It is your life and your career.

You have to be in charge!

No matter how good your mentors are the ball is really in your court.

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Welcome to CLIMB!!!

Rick McGee, Ph.D.

Assoc. Dean for Faculty Recruitment and Professional Development

Northwestern University, Feinberg School of Medicine

r-mcgee@northwestern.edu

312-503-1737

Rubloff 12-129

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY