

## Applying the Speed-Dating Model and Other Approaches to Foster Future Leaders for the American Society of Gene and Cell Therapy

*Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.*

—Benjamin Franklin

**D**uring a Strategic Planning retreat in 2011, the American Society of Gene and Cell Therapy (ASGCT) leadership acknowledged a short-fall in support and involvement of junior investigators in the field. It was recognized that these new investigators—defined as individuals within the first 10 years of their faculty position—are essential for an effective leadership succession plan. In response, the ASGCT formed the New Investigator Committee, comprising 10 new investigator scientists at various stages of transition, each recommended by established members of the Society, under the chairmanship of Matthew Weitzman (other current members of the ASGCT New Investigator Committee are Luk Vandenberghe, Miguel Sena-Estevés, Maria Limberis, Scott Q. Harper, Andrew C. Wilber, Eirini Papapetrou, and Casey Maguire). The primary goal of this committee is to foster future leadership for the Society through creation and implementation of a comprehensive mentoring and support program for students, postdoctoral fellows, trainees, and other new investigators.

It goes without saying that mentoring is a critical component of any successful scientific career. Mentoring can help guide early-stage scientists toward opportunities that benefit their research and further their careers. This is especially important in the current constrained funding climate, exacerbated by sequestration and a nearly 50% drop in success rates for National Institutes of Health (NIH) applications since the Society's foundation in 1996 (30%) to the present (17% in 2013).<sup>1</sup> It is well established that effective mentoring is beneficial for both the mentor and the mentee; successful mentees mean more publications, grants, collaborations, and job opportunities. Mentoring is so critical to the success of transitioning young scientists that *Nature* published a guide for mentors based on the qualities and skills

exemplified by the nominees to the *Nature* awards for creative mentoring in science.<sup>2</sup> A key component to successful mentorship highlighted in the guide is a long-term commitment, one that extends through the career launch of the mentee. Moreover, having more than one mentor—specifically, someone other than a direct supervisor—boosts the benefits of the mentee-mentor relationship even further. However, making connections with potential mentors who meet these criteria can be challenging for early-stage scientists, who typically rely on supervisors for mentorship or to make alternative mentor recommendations and introductions. This is especially difficult in situations in which the new scientist and the supervisor have different personal strengths.

From the outset, the New Investigator Committee understood that overcoming these challenges would require personal access to a large number of scientists within the gene and cell therapy field, as well as a venue in which to foster interpersonal interaction. Therefore, we initiated a “speed-dating” approach within the Annual Meeting program. Briefly, transitional or full Society members willing to serve as a mentor submit a curriculum vitae and brief biography, which are published on the ASGCT website (<http://www.asgct.org/get-involved/mentor-mentee>). Potential mentees may make contact through the website or participate in a two-hour speed-networking event held during one evening of the Annual Meeting. Mentees choose four to five potential mentors they would like to meet during the event and are assigned a total of four 8-minute meetings with as many of their chosen potential mentors as possible. They receive resumes for each mentee they will meet, and both mentors and mentees receive an “appointment card” to keep on schedule, with suggested questions to ask. The event consists of a cocktail hour followed by the guided speed-

networking session and additional networking opportunities. For three consecutive years, this event has drawn a high level of participation and positive comments from both mentees and mentors, and many have returned in subsequent years to expand their potential networks or to continue fostering positive interactions. It is regarded as one of the Annual Meeting's most fun and productive events for new investigators.

Although the committee is encouraged by this initial success, the ability of this event to foster meaningful, long-term mentoring relationships remains to be evaluated. Clearly there is room for improvement in mentor participation: currently only 23 Society members are listed online, and a total of 27 participated in the speed-networking event, including 9 members of the New Investigator Committee. Despite the low number of available mentors, a crowd of unregistered mentees is frequently in attendance, hoping to take advantage of opportunities to network outside of the guided session. Furthermore, we are consistently challenged with bridging two obvious gaps in participating mentors: the gender gap (only one third of mentors are female) and the leadership gap (only two or three mentors each year are current or past ASGCT Board members, highlighting the need to engage ASGCT leadership in mentoring commitments). The latter is a significant barrier to the continued success of the future Society leadership. Thus, increasing participation by both female Society members and members with leadership experience, as well as fostering long-term interactions between "matched" mentors and mentees, are primary goals for the committee in the coming term.

Liaison between Society leaders and the newer generation of members is critical to understanding how ASGCT is structured, and paramount to identifying areas where more early-stage scientists can get involved. Attendance and participation in open discussions organized by the committee have often exceeded the time allotted for these events, supporting our premise that new investigators are motivated to get involved but lack the network or information to do so effectively. The committee seeks to provide the constituency with more information and opportunities to get involved, and it recognizes that there are aspects of supporting successful new science careers that are critical to maintaining the

population of future membership and leadership in the Society. The established investigators and leaders of ASGCT need to sustain a committed effort to train new investigators to navigate the mainstays of successful scientific careers (e.g., grant writing and publishing). Outside mentors are different from direct lab supervisors in that they provide mentees opportunities to open up without fear of consequences (our "speed-mentoring" is safe mentoring!), while broadening the scope of career advice and potentially the global network. This is not to underestimate the role of the mentee in ensuring longevity and success of such a relationship. First impressions and follow-up are important, as well as respect and understanding for the time and effort of the mentor. In addition, getting involved in the Society, its organizing committees, and this and our other journals are all excellent ways to learn the skills required for success and increase access to potential mentors.

We understand that, as with any relationship, mentoring requires time and dedication from both the mentee and the mentor. Mentoring is a significant commitment and responsibility, but—in addition to the benefits highlighted above—it returns to the mentor the great satisfaction of knowing that we have influenced the next generation of scientists. Moreover, the higher the number of quality mentors available, the more likely it is that successful "matches" will be made and the smaller the burden on each individual mentor. We encourage both mentors and mentees to get involved with the Society's new activities so that we can all learn together how to fulfill its mission and develop therapies that will alleviate human disease.

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