Faculty Writing Groups Supporting Productivity

Peter R Chai, MD, MMS[1], **Stephanie P Carreiro, MD**[2], **Jennifer L Carey, MD**[2], **Katherine L Boyle, MD**[3], **Brittany P Chapman, BS**[2], **Edward W Boyer, MD, PhD**[1]

[1]Division of Medical Toxicology, Department of Emergency Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School

[2]Division of Medical Toxicology, Department of Emergency Medicine, University of Massachusetts Medical School

[3]Division of Medical Toxicology, Department of Emergency Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School

The period of transition to academic junior faculty after postgraduate training is a challenging time to maintain scholarly productivity.(1) New faculty embarking on careers as researchers or clinician-educators often have difficulty finding time to develop their individual academic niche; this is often due to competing commitments such as clinical work, administrative responsibilities, and service obligations.(2) The requirements of working in an academic medical center (university-affiliated hospital system), coupled with a lack of protected time, threaten productivity and academic success.(3)

The difficulties of simultaneously initiating research investigations, achieving grant funding, and working clinically have led to structured programs like grant review groups, funded fellowships, junior faculty development programs and writing retreats (Table 1).(1,4,5) Participation in junior faculty development programs improves retention of academic faculty and facilitates downstream academic success.(6,7) These activities are effective at pairing junior faculty with senior-level mentors, but are dependent on the commitment and availability of senior faculty with aligning academic interests.

At some institutions, significant barriers exist, such as limited financial support for junior faculty, few senior faculty providing mentorship, and limited senior mentors in appropriate fields of study.(8,9) In such cases, junior academicians may experience less productivity, miss opportunities for grant funding, and ultimately turn away from academic careers. Delayed mentorship for junior faculty can lead to involvement in divergent, unfocused commitments and projects that may distract from efforts to obtain protected academic time and apply for grant funding within their area of interest.

Corresponding Author: Peter R Chai, MD, MMS, Division of Medical Toxicology, Department of Emergency Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, pchai@bwh.harvard.edu, (o) 617-732-5640.
DR PETER RAY CHAI (Orcid ID : 0000-0003-0955-4117)

We believe that junior faculty-initiated writing and peer mentoring groups are a sustainable method to encourage productivity among new faculty. This toolbox describes how we created a self-sustaining junior faculty writing group, the Sustaining High-level Achievement by Reinforcing Each other (SHARE) writing group It also describes the benefits of peer mentorship, and guides readers in the development of their own writing group.

An example of peer mentorship success: The SHARE writing group

Based on the desire to create a structured writing group of peers with the common goal of developing a supportive infrastructure through the transition from trainee to junior faculty, we created the SHARE writing group. We identified key metrics of academic productivity important to ourselves and to academic advancement in general. The SHARE group met monthly and consisted of a 1–2 hour review of the past month's progress in terms of manuscripts, research, and grants (Figure 1). To assess our development as faculty, we also discussed the SHARE group's work in mentoring by reviewing academic success of mentees. Most importantly, we devoted the majority of time to discussing barriers in completing manuscripts, cultivating new research studies, and overseeing our mentees. This group discussion identified common barriers in research progress among SHARE members, and fostered strategies to help advance SHARE members' academic agendas.

We conducted SHARE sessions monthly from October 2016 to October 2017. The members of the SHARE writing group (PRC, SC, KLB, JC) were residency trained emergency medicine junior faculty who had completed subspecialty training in medical toxicology and were practicing clinical emergency medicine with variable protected time for research. During this time period, we significantly boosted our academic productivity while supporting each other in our academic interests (Table 2). We published more manuscripts, and successfully submitted multiple grants compared to the year prior to initiation of the SHARE writing group. Additionally, we were able to use the SHARE mechanism to collaborate on projects in which members had mutual interest. Beyond successful manuscripts and grant submissions, one of our most notable achievements was the mentoring of trainees in research investigations and academic writing. During this period, our trainees first-authored five peer-reviewed manuscripts and presented six abstracts as oral platform presentations at academic meetings.

Benefits of successful peer mentorship

Mentorship in career advancement, grantsmanship and scientific writing is vital for successful junior faculty development. While structured mentorship has traditionally encouraged junior faculty to learn from senior faculty members, the SHARE sessions show us that junior faculty may also benefit from mutual peer support. Young academic trainees share similar barriers in starting careers—balancing clinical or teaching obligations with research interests, learning scientific writing, grantsmanship and mentoring trainees. Many of these barriers can be addressed by peers who although junior, share variable perspectives (Table 3).

Junior faculty-initiated writing groups also help recently graduated trainees learn time management strategies and techniques in editing manuscripts and grants through successes and failures of their peers. Additionally, junior faculty may feel more comfortable discussing daily operational issues surrounding navigating administrative duties, institutional review boards, and mentees among their peers. The experience of critiquing their peer's writing, and brainstorming methods in which to advance research projects helps junior faculty develop as mentors.

Academic groups should consider implementing junior faculty peer support groups especially among graduating fellows who have likely forged friendships during training and are in a unique position to support each other as they embark in academic careers across different institutions. We have outlined some of the key features of writing groups that are important for implementation in Box 1. Long term friendships and partnerships can develop into productive academic collaborations under the framework of a junior faculty writing group described in this manuscript. The ability to bring junior faculty members together in these writing groups provides new graduates a feeling of comradery and allows continued productivity as they adjust to new institutions.

Box 1

Key features of a junior faculty writing group session

- Group members select a priori metrics of productivity that are important to monitor

- Group and individual projects/metrics tracked on a shared spreadsheet that is accessible to all the members of the group using a cloud-based sharing utility

- Each group member updates the spreadsheet prior to the monthly meeting

- A dedicated 1–2 hour session is held every month with all group members at a central location with wireless internet access

- Group systematically review projects and metrics on spreadsheet, then discussion opens to areas of concern and group brainstorms solutions

- Next monthly meeting is scheduled

- At the conclusion of each meeting, each member commits to completing a specific task (eg. submit a manuscript) by the next meeting

Developing a peer mentorship writing group

While most junior faculty groups include a senior faculty as a mentor, some barriers new junior faculty encounter may be best discussed among peers. While senior faculty can help junior faculty navigate promotions and grantsmanship, daily operational issues and nascent research concepts may be better discussed in a junior faculty writing group. The development of such a group should focus on two major goals: building a framework of peer support networks that nurture successful academic careers while forging collaborative

relationships that can be used to help solve common barriers to academic productivity. Predetermining topics to discuss can help generate structured and productive dialogue during sessions.

To begin, interested junior faculty members should identify 2–3 colleagues who are committed to having a productive career in academic medicine. The members should have similar goals they hope to achieve through the peer mentorship group. Group members do not need to be at the same institution, but should be in geographic proximity to facilitate regular meetings. Additionally, all members should be at similar stages in their career to be considered "peers". It is less important for the group members to have the same research areas of interest. While sharing interests can certainly lead to collaborations and foster productivity, it is not a requirement of the group.

Once the members of the group have been established, the group should identify what goals and scholarly achievement they wish to achieve. We recommend recording and tracking goals using a spreadsheet or document that can be edited and shared among group members. After defining agreed upon metrics to track, the group should schedule regular meetings at a location with accessible internet that is convenient to all group members.

Sessions should follow the same structure to stay focused and maximize productivity. Group members can decide what order to discuss business, but we recommend setting aside time to review each project a group member is working on, acknowledge successes and accomplishments that have occurred since the last meeting, and brainstorm about potential pitfalls or roadblocks. At the conclusion of each meeting, the participants can schedule their next session and set a goal they will accomplish by the next month.

Potential pitfalls

Although we had success in implementing the SHARE writing group, not all academic groups may share in our success. Our group of participants were junior faculty who were already committed to a career as clinician scientists with similar research interests, allowing us to discuss mutual barriers to completing research and publishing results. Peer groups maybe unable to achieve the same level of success if their participants do not share similar backgrounds, research interests and goals. Additionally, a variety of writing support group formats exist(1,7,10,11), and the format that positions faculty best for success should be selected. Some junior faculty who do not have as much experience in research or writing may benefit from closer guidance by senior faculty in individual mentoring programs or structured junior faculty development programs. However, even in these settings, an academic peer support group like the SHARE writing group may still be beneficial by serving as a supplement to existing faculty development initiatives.

Conclusion

The transition from trainee to junior faculty is a critical period where academic productivity can suffer. Implementing a junior faculty-focused writing group that provides structured time for discussion of academic advancement while providing peer support in an equitable environment can help guide new faculty through this transition. Our experience with the

SHARE writing group demonstrates that junior faculty peer support is feasible and beneficial for participants as well as their mentees. We encourage clinical teachers to support and help learners develop junior faculty writing groups to support academic productivity. This practice may help individuals overcome barriers to their academic development as they become new faculty.

Acknowledgments

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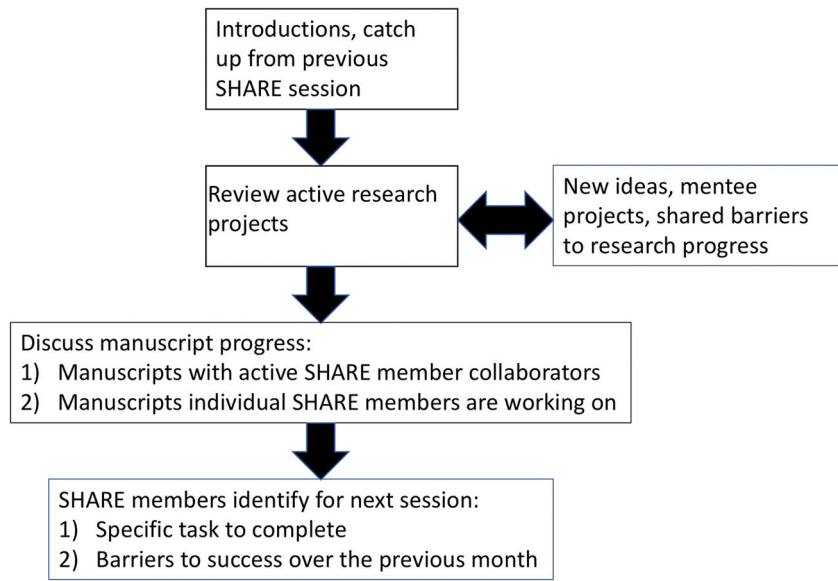
Introductions, catch
up from previous
SHARE session

Review active research
projects

New ideas, mentee
projects, shared barriers
to research progress

Discuss manuscript progress:
1) Manuscripts with active SHARE member collaborators
2) Manuscripts individual SHARE members are working on

SHARE members identify for next session:
1) Specific task to complete
2) Barriers to success over the previous month

Figure 1.

Table 1

Current junior faculty support systems

Support System	Structure
Junior Faculty Development Program	Courses over one year on aspects of faculty development with personalized projects
Writing Retreat	Group retreats with senior faculty and structured time to write manuscripts/grants
Funded Fellowships	University-funded fellowships that cover salary and provide basic faculty support
Training Grant Review Groups	Senior faculty review of training or foundation grants from junior faculty

Table 2

Productivity of the SHARE session

Activity		Productivity during SHARE Session	Productivity before SHARE Session
Peer-reviewed manuscripts accepted		16	6
Abstracts presented at academic meetings		25	12
Invited lectures presented at academic meetings		12	4
Grants submitted		13	1
Mentee Type	**Productivity**		
	First-authored Manuscripts	**First-authored Posters**	**Presentations**
Premedical college student (N=1)	0	3	1
Medical Student (N=6)	0	7	3
Resident (N=5)	0	3	1
Fellow (N=2)	5	3	1

Table 3

Common barriers to productivity with potential solutions that can be explored in a peer mentorship group

Barrier	Examples of solutions
Writing a manuscript	• Brainstorm methods to create time to write • Develop an outline • Plan submission deadline for manuscripts
Navigating the Institutional Review Board (IRB): research ethics committee	• Brainstorm research design • Collect examples of language used in other IRB submissions
Developing a research plan	• Map out a series of investigations along one faculty member's interests • Build a collaborative series of investigations between two members of the SHARE session
Managing Mentors/Mentees	• Share strategies of how other SHARE members discuss new concepts with their mentor • Learn different mentorship styles from other SHARE members' mentors • Discuss opportunities to help mentor students • Identify strategies to optimize mentorship for mentees of various skill levels and abilities