

# COVID-19 & the Residency Match

## *The Added Importance of Mentoring*

*Bridger M. Rodoni, BS,\*✉ Nicholas W. Eyrich, MS,\* and David P. Fessell, MD\*†*

**Keywords:** away rotations, COVID-19, education, leadership, mentee, mentor, mentorship, residency match, surgery

(*Ann Surg* 2020;272:e151–e152)

The role of mentors in the Match process is invaluable across specialties. It is not uncommon for mentors to contact program directors (PD's) on behalf of their mentees to encourage further consideration or to provide endorsement. This year mentoring may be more important than ever.

Although some institutions continue to delay visiting student rotations in the setting of COVID-19, others are canceling them altogether. In certain fields like Orthopaedic Surgery, Plastic Surgery, Urology, and Neurosurgery among others, such away rotations are commonplace. They offer numerous opportunities related to the Match including a combination of audition, education, and marketing one's program.<sup>1</sup> Without visitor rotations, PDs will need to acquire this type of information in other ways. Interprofessional networks and mentor-mentee relationships are an extraordinary resource for PD's seeking applicants that best fit their program and applicants seeking opportunities to stand out to programs of interest. Although there have been previous articles that provide general rules to follow as a mentor and mentee, the rapidly changing environment necessitates novel solutions. In this article, we offer suggestions on how mentors and mentees can synergistically navigate the unique circumstances of COVID-19 and help ensure a beneficial outcome for all.

### MENTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Identify Your Needs

Challenging times of COVID-19 demand flexibility and shifting priorities as students face ongoing uncertainty regarding curricular requirements, licensing exams, and the residency match process. Holding concerns about how to distinguish themselves in the residency application process without the same opportunities afforded before the pandemic, students must adapt their goals to the current situation. The 4 golden rules proposed by Chopra et al provide a helpful framework for communicating the mentee's goals and developing an effective mentor-mentee relationship. These rules emphasize the importance of mentor selection, respect, communication, and an energizing attitude.<sup>2</sup> The current COVID-19 circumstances are unique in that personal and family needs may be more critical and potentially may claim more time, emotion, and energy. As such, the need for personal reflection cannot be overstated in developing personal and professional priorities. As a mentee, proper

identification of specific, actionable goals is an essential step before reaching out for help.

#### Mentor Selection

With an established list of goals, next comes the critical step of selecting a mentor. This step may be complicated by unconventional work schedules and the current inability to meet in person. Qualities of your mentor may be encompassed by using the archetypes of mentorship that best align with your aspirations moving forward, including traditional mentors, coaches, sponsors, and connectors.<sup>3</sup> During this time, you may find value in an alternative or hybrid archetype given this rapidly progressing situation.

Furthermore, there are well-established questions useful in selecting a mentor that remain applicable during COVID-19,<sup>4</sup> which can provide much-needed structure in this fluid process. Whether it be moving research projects forward, reaching out to potential residency programs on your behalf, or career coaching, clarity of goals enable mentees to appropriately clarify the assistance they need in support of a successful residency application.

#### Managing Expectations and Communication

Every physician's experience during COVID-19 has been different. Therefore, when establishing the first mentoring connection, the initial communication should allow for the mentee to better understand the mentor's competing demands inside and outside of medicine. From changing clinical duties to extraordinary family circumstances, to uncertainty around laboratory studies, these subjects may be difficult to broach. However, discussion of these topics can help mentees better anticipate mentor availability and the most efficient means of communication moving forward.

It is important to clearly establish your mentor's communication preference (E-mail, facetime, zoom, text, etc) and desired frequency (weekly, monthly, prn, etc). As a mentee, this may even be a time to leverage your knowledge of new technologies by inviting mentors to newer communication methods. Similarly, being that meetings with mentors may have more time constraints, establishing a clear agenda before meetings is an excellent way to support efficiency, productivity, and ensure all important objectives are met.

Clearly and efficiently communicating the ways that your mentor can help you during this time and actively looking for ways in which to help your mentor approach the ever-changing landscape of COVID-19 can help support a synergistic relationship and build mutually satisfying, life-long relationships.

### MENTOR RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Understand Mentee's Goals and Competing Demands

Mentors should strive to understand the short and long-term goals of their mentees to best facilitate their success. As the implications of COVID-19 continue to evolve, mentees, like their mentors, face an increased degree of uncertainty and stress that can provoke anxiety. Taking the time to communicate with mentees about the unique challenges they face and how they impact progress toward

From the \*University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and †Department of Radiology, Michigan Medicine, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

✉bmrodoni@med.umich.edu.

This article was completed without external funding.

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Copyright © 2020 Wolters Kluwer Health, Inc. All rights reserved.

ISSN: 0003-4932/20/27202-e151

DOI: 10.1097/SLA.0000000000004033

meeting personal goals is important. Cancellations of away rotations, financial turmoil, and ill family members can alter the Mentee's well-being. Be sure to speak candidly and with kindness, separate the person from the issue, and always use a private setting.<sup>4</sup> Although some mentors may find these conversations difficult, uncertain times offer an unparalleled opportunity to support and ultimately strengthen the mentor-mentee connection.

### Acknowledge Professional Connections and Limitations

Many mentors routinely advocate for their mentee's in the Match by calling PDs, department chairs, and other faculty outside of their own institution. With the status of away rotations in question and programs seeking insight into potential future residents through other means, the potential role of advocacy on behalf of your mentee is heightened. However, it is also important for the mentee to understand the evolving limitations of COVID-19, as mentioned above. Many faculty are being asked to take on new, more time-consuming roles within their departments and health systems.

In response to this, traditional mentors may find difficulties in serving their mentees due to new time constraints. Mentees may find an increased value in Sponsors whose role is to strongly advocate for their student, especially as the interviewing season draws closer.<sup>5</sup> For example, away rotations are commonly used to obtain critical letters of recommendation. If these are canceled, the value of having a sponsor drastically increases for mentees. Thus, it may be beneficial to adjust mentorship archetypes according to mentee needs.

### Leverage Advantages of Team Mentorship

Team mentorship has increasingly become the new standard of mentorship.<sup>4</sup> It allows for distribution of workload among mentors,

enabling them to meet their increased demands whereas still providing support for their mentees. Further, a team of mentors provides broader perspective and support for mentees.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, team mentorship affords security in uncertain circumstances.<sup>4,6</sup> A team approach can allow continued mentee support if a specific mentor becomes ill, requires an extended leave, or is redeployed into new duties that leave little or no time for mentoring.

### CONCLUSIONS

Although it has always been important to seek out strong mentorship, the value and role of mentors during these uncertain times are heightened. There are, however, clear principles that can help ensure a successful and synergistic relationship such as communication, organization, and flexibility. Together, these relationships can help both mentors and mentees successfully navigate the challenges of COVID-19.

### REFERENCES

1. Griffith M, DeMasi SC, McGrath AJ, et al. Time to reevaluate the away rotation: improving return on investment for students and schools. *Acad Med.* 2019;94:496–500.
2. Chopra V, Woods MD, Saint S. The four golden rules of effective menteeship. *BMJ.* 2016;354:i4147.
3. Chopra V, Edelson DP, Saint S. A PIECE OF MY MIND. Mentorship malpractice. *JAMA.* 2016;315:1453–1454.
4. Chopra V, Vaughn V, Saint S. *The Mentoring Guide: Helping Mentors & Mentees Succeed.* Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing; 2019, MI 48104-3209.
5. Chopra V, Arora VM, Saint S. Will you be my mentor?-four archetypes to help mentees succeed in academic medicine. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2018;178:175–176.
6. Chopra, Vineet, and Sanjay Saint. "6 Things Every Mentor Should Do." *Harvard Business Review*, 24 July 2017, hbr.org/2017/03/6-things-every-mentor-should-do.