

GUIDELINES TO SUPPORT THE TRAINING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POSTDOCTORAL IRTAS, VISITING FELLOWS, AND CLINICAL FELLOWS AND THEIR MENTORS

Background

The guidelines were developed and approved by the Group on Graduate, Research, Education, and Training (GREAT) group of the Association of American Medical Colleges in fall 2006, and have been modified to suit the experience of fellows in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, as of summer 2007.

The document is intended to serve as a guide both to incoming fellows in INCHD and to their mentors, as well as to guide both parties throughout the training period. It is not meant to be prescriptive, but rather to serve as a basis for establishing of a mentoring relationship leading to a productive scientific experience for the fellow.

CORE TENENTS OF POSTDOCTORAL TRAINING

NICHHD mentors are committed to maintaining high standards of training and to providing support to ensure that a trainee acquires the skill and abilities to be able to function independently as a scientific professional. Oversight is the responsibility of the individual investigator-mentor, the directors of each of the NICHHD scientific programs, and, ultimate, the Scientific Director of the Division of Intramural Research (DIR). Under the Scientific Director, an Office of Education develops programs and delivers support to fellows across the DIR, both in defined skills areas and in support of professional careers, with input from mentors and intramural leadership.

Postdoctoral training is an integral component of the preparation of scientists for career advancement as scientific professionals. The postdoctoral appointee undertakes scholarship and associated activities that together provide a training experience essential for career advancements.

Individuals should be trained to formulate meaningful hypotheses, design and conduct interpretable experiments, adhere to good laboratory practices, analyze results critically, understand the broad significance of their research findings, and uphold the highest ethical standards in research.¹ Integral to this scientific training are the development of skills including oral and written communication, grantsmanship, and laboratory management.

Effective mentoring is critical for postdoctoral training and requires that the primary mentor dedicate substantial time to ensure personal and professional development of the trainee. A good mentor builds a relationship with the trainee that is characterized by mutual respect and understanding. Attributes of a good mentor include being approachable, available, and willing to share knowledge; listing effectively; providing encouragement and constructive criticism; and offering expertise and guidance.

¹See Guidelines for the Conduct of Research in the Intramural Research Program at NIH https://oir.nih.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/sourcebook/documents/ethical_conduct/guidelines-conduct_research.pdf; and A Guide to Training and Mentoring in the Intramural Research Program at NIH https://oir.nih.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/sourcebook/documents/mentoring/guide-training_and_mentoring-10-08.pdf

COMMITMENTS OF POSTDOCTORAL AND CLINICAL APPOINTEES

- I understand that I have the primary responsibility for the development of my own career. I recognize that I must take a realistic look at career opportunities and follow a path that matches my individual skills, values, and interests.
- I will develop a mutually defined research project with my mentor that includes well-defined goals and timelines.
- I will perform my research activities conscientiously, maintain good research records, and catalog and maintain all tangible research materials that result from the research project.²
- I will respect all ethical standards of the NIH and the Federal Government when conducting my research as they relate to responsible conduct of research, privacy and human subjects research, animal care and use, laboratory safety, and use of radioisotopes. I recognize that this commitment includes asking for guidance when I face ethical or compliance uncertainties and reporting on breeches of ethical or compliance standards by me and/or others.³
- I will show respect for and work collegially with my coworkers, support staff, and other members of the NIH community with whom I interact.
- I will endeavor to assume progressive responsibility for the management of my research projects.
- I will seek regular feedback on my performance and request a formal evaluation from my mentor at least once a year.
- I will have open and timely discussions with my mentor about the dissemination of research findings and the distribution of research materials to their parties.
- I recognize that I have embarked on a career requiring lifelong learning. To meet this obligation, I realize that I need to stay informed about the latest developments in my field through reading the literature, regular attendance at relevant seminar series, and attendance at scientific meetings were possible.
- I will seek opportunities to develop the professional skills (e.g., writing, oral communication, teaching) necessary to be successful for my chosen career.
- I will work with my mentor to submit research results for publication in a timely manner.

At the end of my appointment and in accordance with NIH policy, I will leave behind all original notebooks, computerized files, and tangible research materials so that other individuals can carry on related research.

² See notes 1 and 3.

³ See <https://oir.nih.gov/sourcebook/ethical-conduct>, in particular New Employee Ethics Training and Annual Ethics Training, online modules accessible from this site.

COMMITMENTS OF MENTORS

The postdoctoral period is a time of advanced training intended to develop the skills needed to promote the career of the trainee.

As a mentor, it is my responsibility to:

- ensure that a mutually agreed upon set of expectations and goals are established at the outset of the postdoctoral training period, and I will work with the trainee to create a career development plan.
- maintain a relationship with the postdoctoral trainee based on trust and mutual respect, through open communication and, at least annually, a performance review.⁴
- ensure that the trainee has sufficient opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to become an expert in his or her area of investigation.
- seek the assistance of other scientists, NICHD and NIH resources, to support a fellow's scientific and professional development.
- encourage progressive responsibility of the fellow, as appropriate, to facilitate his or her transition to independence.
- encourage the fellow to interact with fellow scientists both intramurally and extramurally, and encourage presentation of research findings and attendance at professional meetings, where possible.
- ensure that research performed by the fellow is submitted for publication in a timely manner and that s/he receives appropriate credit for his/her work. I will acknowledge his/her contribution to the development of any intellectual property and will define future access to tangible research materials in accordance with NIH and Federal policy.
- recognize that there are multiple career options open to fellows and will provide assistance in exploring appropriate options, either directly or through access to NICHD and NIH resources.
- support the fellow's transition to the next stage in his or her career, to the extent possible.

Issued in 2007, through Office of Education
Division of Intramural Research, NICHD

⁴ Note that requirements of the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education require twice-annual evaluations with the program director.