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## Mentoring Relationships in the Field of Sexually Transmitted Infections: Experiences, Observations, and Recommendations

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we describe: (a) our experiences and accomplishments in the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) Research Scholars Mentoring Program; (b) the current state of mentorship in the field of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); (c) the fundamental factors of successful mentoring, including alignment with personal values, transparency, intentionality, respect, equity, empathy, and emotional intelligence. The authors have reviewed their experiences in mentoring and receiving mentorship and have collectively identified concepts they valued in mentoring relationships, particularly those that are useful for women in science. The authors provide recommendations and considerations for future mentoring relationships.

### **Keywords**

mentoring, sexually transmitted infections, research

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**Alison Footman, PhD, MPH**  
**Barbara Van Der Pol, PhD, MPH**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we describe: (a) our experiences and accomplishments in the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) Research Scholars Mentoring Program; (b) the current state of mentorship in the field of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); (c) the fundamental factors of successful mentoring, including alignment with personal values, transparency, intentionality, respect, equity, empathy, and emotional intelligence. The authors have reviewed their experiences in mentoring and receiving mentorship and have collectively identified concepts they valued in mentoring relationships, particularly those that are useful for women in science. The authors provide recommendations and considerations for future mentoring relationships.

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The American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) has created a formal, one-year mentorship program to broaden career development opportunities in health behavior research, called the Research Scholars Mentoring Program (RSMP). In this paper, we describe recent RSMP experiences from the mentee and mentor perspective and outline our associated accomplishments. Additionally, we discuss the current mentorship within the field of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) research and provide recommendations for future partnerships. We end with a discussion of fundamental factors of successful mentoring, including alignment with personal values, transparency, intentionality, respect, equity, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Contributors to this commentary include senior researcher Barbara Van Der Pol, PhD (BVDP, Mentor), early-career researcher Stacey Griner, PhD (SG, Mentee, 2021-2022), and post-doctoral fellow Alison Footman, PhD (AF).

### **Experience with the Research Scholars Mentorship Program**

BVDP and SG were matched and participated in the 2021 Cycle of the AAHB RSMP. The purpose of this program is to mentor early career investigators in the production of high-quality scholarly research products that address health behavior-related research (Smith, 2019). The program lasts 12 months and is primarily driven by the mentee. In this case, SG (mentee) identified BVDP (mentor) from a list of senior AAHB members based on her expertise and work in the STIs scientific community. SG and BVDP were not connected prior to this program, and SG “cold called” BVDP via email to determine her interest in serving as a mentor in the program. After agreeing to participate in the program, the two began to develop their workplan (Smith, 2019).

## Mentee Experience and Accomplishments

SG's primary goals in participating in the RSMP were to increase STI-related publications, expand STI-related research network and collaborations, and pursue STI-related funding opportunities. To achieve these goals, BVDP and SG met biweekly to discuss progress and potential opportunities. BVDP's extensive network of STI collaborators and knowledge of opportunities and organizations were beneficial to SG, who may not have otherwise identified the opportunities. For example, BVDP recommended applying for a small grant award offered by the American Sexually Transmitted Disease Association (ASTDA), which SG submitted and received funded for during the mentoring period. Data collection has been completed and the project will result in a longer-term, collaborative relationship between the two, including publications and potentially larger funded studies. BVDP has also provided letters of support and feedback on an R01 proposal submitted by SG to the National Cancer Institute, which was reviewed and scored. Additionally, during the mentoring period, SG submitted three STI-related grants with guidance from BVDP, two of which were awarded.

SG has also expanded her research network by attending two annual *Improving STI Control Efforts through Collaboration among Public Health, Academia, and Industry* workgroup meetings, organized by ASTDA and led by BVDP. These workgroup meetings bring together researchers, industry representatives, regulatory agencies, and clinicians, all focused on STIs. Many of the workgroup members participated in outlining the discussions that occurred during the meeting, which has strengthened SG's STI network and resulted in a publication with many senior faculty members in the STI community (Van Gerwen et al., 2022). Through this meeting, SG and AF connected

over their interests in implementation science and STI vaccines. Together, the authors continue to collaborate and are currently completing a systematic review and meta-analysis related to STI screening methods with BVDP.

The RSMP mentor-mentee team have published several peer-reviewed manuscripts including a position statement for the ASTDA related to consumer-based STI screening (Exten et al., 2021), the summary of the workshop (Van Gerwen et al., 2022), and several more drafts in progress related to STI screening. Although SG's work is primarily focused on implementation science and health behaviors associated with STI screening, with encouragement from BVDP she submitted abstracts and attended conferences focused on STI diagnostics and microbiology. For example, a four-page, peer-reviewed abstract developed during the mentorship period was selected for oral presentation at the Julius Schachter Fifteenth International Symposium on Human Chlamydial Infections in June 2022. While attending this conference, BVDP connected SG with industry partners for potential collaboration, and together they are now planning future projects.

## Mentor Experience

BVDP had not previously participated in the AAHB mentorship program, and she identified several strong features of the program during her time as a mentor. Recommended meeting schedules and required reports helped ensure that RSMP activities did not languish (even in the face of unexpected efforts related to institutional COVID-19 response). Additionally, the mentoring relationship was supported by standing meeting times to discuss progress and the impact of distance was negated. BVDP is invested in recruiting early career-stage investigators to the STI scientific

community and the AAHB mechanism allowed her to engage in the mentorship process with someone outside of her institution. The workplan developed at the beginning of the relationship allowed for the creation of pre-determined goals regarding meeting attendance, presentations, and publications, and also helped set achievable goals early in the process and meet those goals.

BVDP's experience with mentoring a doctoral candidate (AF, now a post-doctoral fellow) from her institution was affected by COVID, but AF's resilience was key to her success. AF was successful in adapting her research strategy and remaining on track for graduation. This level of resilience, which is facilitated by frequent and open communication and mentor support of novel approaches, has been a hallmark of BVDP's previous experiences with successful trainees.

### **Mentoring in the STI Scientific Community**

Collaboration across academic, public, and private/industry sectors within the STI scientific community is essential to improve diagnostics and provide quality care (Van Gerwen et al., 2022). Development of these more complex partnerships makes mentorship even more important – as guidance may be needed to expand research and collaboration networks and successfully navigate the STI field. As experienced by SG, it is often difficult to make connections, “break in” to the field, and successfully pursue research related to these topics if disconnected from the STI community. In fact, the American Sexually Transmitted Disease Association (ASTDA) has recognized a gap in the field - limited opportunities for the growth of trainees and early career faculty (ASTDA, 2022). This is well documented as a priority for ASTDA, as

one of the organization's objectives is *to develop the current and future generations of STI professionals* (ASTDA, 2022). More senior faculty now on the verge of retirement are struggling to find well-qualified early career investigators to carry the field forward. Training positions are often limited to one of the four or five premier STI research programs and support of early career-stage investigators at other institutions has become a major focus of ASTDA in response to this serious concern (ASTDA, 2022). Given the pair's experiences with the RSMP, a program such as this may be a model for other professional organizations, including ASTDA, to consider utilizing to strengthen the trajectory of early career investigators.

In partnerships like those that are established through RSMP, the goals center around academic or professional growth; however, in working with mentors in the STI field, the authors also value the personal growth that may occur. The early career authors on this paper have gained stronger research networks and opportunities by being invited to small workgroups facilitated by BVDP to discuss emerging STI issues. From this, we have seen a wide variety of successful STI-related career options in academia, public health, or industry. From the invitations to participate in these meetings, we have also gained confidence in our role in and potential contributions to the STI scientific community.

### **Recommendations for the STI Scientific Community**

The AAHB RSMP was a useful opportunity for SG who learned that within the field of STI research, the ASTDA provides a wide range of support for students and early career researchers. These include the ASTDA Young Investigator Award, small project assistance grants, and a summer research fellowship (ASTDA, 2022). To

enhance the current support structures, the authors recommend the establishment of a formal mentoring program similar to the AAHB RSMP to benefit the next generation of STI researchers. A program connecting early career researchers with senior mentors would be beneficial in expanding the field and, because the ASTDA has strong existing partnerships with industry and regulatory agencies, the mentee/mentor pair could also be matched with an industry, public health agency, or community organization partner to form a triad and further develop relationships. We also recommend that ASTDA develop a list of the senior membership who are willing to serve as mentors to early career faculty, along with their subject expertise and any other relevant information. Researchers currently benefit from ASTDA's small project assistance grants but incorporating small amounts of salary support into a mentoring program or project assistance grants might further strengthen the research portfolios of early career faculty members in tenure-track positions.

### **Values in Mentoring**

While the benefits of mentorship are broad, benefits specific to mentorship of women in academia include career and personal development, academic craftsmanship, psychosocial support, and job satisfaction (Cross et al., 2019). In mentoring relationships among women in academia, enabling factors include mentor availability, mentor expertise, supportive relationships, and responsiveness to shifting needs (Cross et al., 2019). These indicate that mentoring relationships may be strengthened by not only alignment in scientific expertise, but also alignment related to personal and professional values and goals.

Effective mentoring strategies include tailoring experiences to meet the needs of the

mentee and effective mentor traits include being approachable and accessible, and demonstrating humility and care for others (Li et al., 2018). Embracing concepts of innovation, purpose, leadership, diversity, and community in mentoring relationships while avoiding hierarchies and subordination which are often present in academia may be beneficial (Waljee et al., 2020). However, many mentoring relationships are built upon these academic hierarchies, which are gendered and marked by competition (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2022). The authors have reviewed their experiences in mentoring and receiving mentorship and have collectively identified concepts they valued in mentoring relationships, particularly those that may be useful for women in science. We provide examples of these values in practice.

### **Transparency and Intentionality**

In the authors' experience, being transparent about the "hidden curriculum" within academia (cultural norms around research, language, authorship), and even within the specific discipline, is essential in dismantling long-standing systems of power (Paton et al., 2020). This transparency is even more critical when working with mentees who may be at a disadvantage from sexism, racism, classism, or ableism (Enders et al., 2021). In collaborative academic relationships, transparency can include sharing experiences, whether academic, such as the process of tenure and promotion, or personal, such as difficulties with work-life balance. Transparency should occur on both sides of the relationship and should include clear expectations (whether on projects or otherwise). Examples of useful exchanges include providing objective feedback on progress and goals, discussing past mentorship experiences, setting and abiding by boundaries, and regularly evaluating the collaborative relationship and discussing

whether it continues to remain beneficial to both parties. It may also include being able to openly express the need for a break or a change in mentorship as the mentee grows professionally.

Transparency overlaps significantly with intentionality, which focuses on prioritizing the relationship through making time to meet at conferences and scheduling standing meeting times. Intentionality can also include invitations to collaborate on projects when the mentee or mentor may have expertise and sharing relevant announcements and opportunities. Mentoring relationships should also be intentional in diversity and inclusion, such as ensuring that teams incorporate diverse voices and people from different backgrounds, races/ethnicities, gender identities, and abilities, and being intentional in welcoming these opinions and experiences. In STI research, this intentionality can include relationship building within academia as well as across industry, community-based, and government organizations.

One key component of transparency and intentionality is having early discussions around “ownership” of ideas for projects. Mentors help refine and strengthen study plans and are invaluable to the development of fundable research grant applications. However, all too often, the mentee presents an idea, the team refines it and subsequently the mentor presents it as their own idea and may seek funding, or write a paper, without including the mentee. This is a common situation that is not necessarily based on mal-intent, but rather a lack of attention to who developed the concept. Conversely, situations may occur where a mentee fails to include the mentor, without whom the project may never have come to fruition. These events may be detrimental to future working relationships and should be managed by having an honest discussion at the onset of the mentor/mentee relationship about

processes that can be put in place to protect both parties and create a safe intellectual working environment for sharing ideas. One approach the authors have found beneficial is the use of authorship agreements to clearly outline roles and expectations prior to beginning a collaborative project.

## Respect

Mentors should seek to create relationships and environments that foster and facilitate open, truthful, and respectful communication – this is key to creating a successful collaboration (Straus et al., 2013). Respect is also represented and communicated through the language used. Use of the term *collaboration* is an indicator of value placed on each person’s contribution rather than a top-down mentoring process, where the trainee is not treated as anything other than a learner. Mentors may also provide guidance but allow mentees to make their own decisions and respect individual autonomy. This also applies to mentors and mentees respecting each other’s time and prioritizing work that benefits both parties.

The culture of academia is complex and may lead to opportunities for bullying through subjective or ambiguous criteria and the tenure process and hierarchies. As many as 25% of academics report experiences of some type of harassment or bullying in a 12-month period - those who are early career faculty or untenured are more likely to report these experiences (Keashly, 2019). While these experiences may not have been directly from mentors, mentors should be reflective of the power differentials and hierarchies inherent in academia and be conscious of statements made to mentees, particularly toward women, gender minorities, and people of color, and comments about attire, physical appearance, or other immutable personality factors. Mentors must also be willing to step in and challenge colleagues

when they witness examples of disrespectful behavior from peers toward the mentor's trainees.

## Equity

Equity may be displayed through an understanding that the contribution of every team member or mentee/mentor is valuable. Bringing together diverse teams can be complicated, but these relationships need to be reciprocal – not only the mentee is benefitting. With innovative methods and approaches emerging regularly in STI research, mentors may also gain new insights from their relationships with early career faculty or doctoral students (Straus et al., 2013). Equity should also be considered in relation to those who serve as mentors – women faculty are more likely to serve as mentors and students often report mental health concerns to women faculty over men faculty (Gibson et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). The responsibility of mentorship – an often-unappreciated form of service – should be distributed to avoid overburdening faculty who are women, gender non-conforming, and people of color (Gibson et al., 2020). The COVID pandemic has highlighted the diversity and equity issues within academia and would benefit from proactive solutions (Malisch et al., 2020), such as financial supplementation, childcare initiatives, and reduced or flexible administrative expectations (Gibson et al., 2020). Mentors may be in a position to advocate for these solutions within their academic institutions.

## Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Personal connections have long been identified as a characteristic of an effective mentoring relationship (Straus et al., 2013). Additionally, in collaborative relationships, empathy should be a priority, particularly because the COVID pandemic may have

increased mental health concerns among academicians (Gibson et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). Being aware and genuinely empathetic when collaborators are struggling, rather than being punitive, can also result in benefits for the mentor through the mentee's productivity (Termini et al., 2021). This may also benefit the next generation of STI researchers, as those in the current mentee role will soon become mentors themselves.

Emotional intelligence and collegiality are also necessary skills in mentoring, particularly given the impact of the COVID pandemic (Gibson et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). SG and AF have appreciated mentors that are empathetic and who recognize that academia can be difficult and emotionally taxing – while also celebrating successes. The early career authors have learned how to mentor by receiving excellent mentorship, and plan to continue these traditions as we advance in our careers and transition into mentoring roles. As women in academia, we encourage early career faculty to advocate for their professional growth and if possible, interact with mentors who are affirming and inclusive, and who increase confidence, rather than those who are exclusionary or who impede success and growth. We also acknowledge the reciprocal nature of these relationships – if a mentee desires a transparent, communicative, and empathetic mentor, then the mentee should also expect to exhibit those traits in return.

## Conclusion

In closing, there is a need to align academic mentoring and collaborative relationships with personal and professional goals, particularly within the STI scientific community. Aspects to prioritize in mentoring relationships include transparency, intentionality, respect, equity, empathy, and emotional intelligence, all of

which may be beneficial for women in academia. Through experiences in the AAHB RSMP, the authors of this manuscript have expanded their STI research networks, co-authored publications, and received research funding related to STIs. As a whole, the field of STI research may benefit from developing a structured, formal mentoring program to support early career researchers in developing independent STI research trajectories.

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