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Mentorship in the Field of Aging: Purposes, Pivots, and Priorities

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Abstract

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Keywords

Gerontology, Professional Society, Mentoring, Career Development

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Mentorship in the Field of Aging: Purposes, Pivots, and Priorities

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Abstract

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) is a multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to advancing the field of aging and improving the lives of older adults. With a long-standing commitment to mentorship and career development, this article focuses on GSA's Mentoring Consultancies and Career Conversations events and their pivot to meet the needs and demands of current and future gerontologists amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This article provides a description of these events in the context of planning, content, and member engagement. Recommendations are provided to other organizations seeking to enrich their membership through mentorship and career development activities.

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Background

Gerontology is a multifaceted and varied discipline comprised of professionals focused on the study of health and aging across the life course. Gerontologists are uniquely trained to employ interdisciplinary, evidence-based solutions across social and health domains to promote healthy aging. However, shortages in professionals seeking careers in aging have been well documented (DesRoches et al., 2022; Holveck & Wick, 2018; Institute of Medicine, 2008; Pace, 2014; Warshaw et al., 2014) and workforce needs continue to be unmet (Foley et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic created additional recruitment and retention strain in the field of aging due to widespread training and development challenges that include: (1) competing demands with clinical appointments in health or social care fields; (2) lack of bandwidth to pursue professional development; and (3) limited opportunities to engage in traditional career opportunities

such as attending conferences and other networking events, which can motivate and encourage young scholars to choose a gerontology career (Levine & Rathmell, 2020; Termini et al., 2021). As many disciplines are pivoting their mentoring and training approaches to address the complex needs of emerging scholars in this context, innovative ways of supporting the development of interdisciplinary professionals pursuing gerontology are needed (Zibold et al., 2021).

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA) is a professional membership association whose mission is to cultivate excellence in interdisciplinary aging research to advance innovations in practice and policy. GSA's 5,400 members include gerontologists, health professionals, behavioral and social scientists, biologists, demographers, economists, and many other disciplines. GSA's multidisciplinary composition is a valued strength, enabling the Society to provide a 360-degree perspective

about the issues facing our population as we age. To achieve its mission, GSA recognizes the value of mentoring and professional development across all stages of a gerontologist's career. The Society seeks to expand opportunities for engagement and professional enhancement of its members.

GSA has long supported a variety of mentoring activities. GSA's Mentor Match is an online user-driven program designed to pair mentors and mentees to build a broader professional network, help define career goals, and refine leadership skills. Careers in Aging Week celebrates and brings greater visibility to the wide-ranging career opportunities in the field of aging. Since 2018, with funding from the National Institute on Aging, GSA has organized the Diversity Mentoring and Career Development Technical Assistance program, an opportunity to empower early career trainees from underrepresented backgrounds to develop a successful strategic plan to contribute to the future of aging research. Also, GSA's Emerging Scholar and Professional Organization (ESPO) developed programs for dissertation and pre-proposal writing groups. In 2020, GSA marked its 75th anniversary and advanced new career development activities to support grant writing, and manuscript writing, as well as reimaged the mentoring consultancies discussed in this paper.

Recognizing the need to pivot and enhance opportunities for mentoring a wide range of scholars during the challenging time of the pandemic, GSA transitioned its mentoring programming—previously limited to in-person interactions at the annual conference—to multiple virtual opportunities throughout the year. These events provided new opportunities to be responsive, accessible, and evolving. This article provides a description of these virtual events in the context of planning, content, and member engagement. Lessons learned and

recommendations will be provided to other professional organizations considering new ways of meeting the professional needs of their members through mentorship and career development activities.

Program Description

The Mentoring Consultancies are a long-standing event traditionally held during the GSA Annual Scientific Meeting. These annual 90-minute roundtable events brought together 10-12 mentors and 60-70 trainees and early career attendees to discuss issues in career development and aging research. The attendees raised questions and mentors facilitated discussion about a broad range of topics including selecting formal mentors, navigating tenure and promotion, forming strong grant teams, designing research studies, finding new employment opportunities, and publishing. Midway through the session, attendees could switch tables to engage in discussion with a different mentor and small group. The event was popular with mentors and mentees, thus requiring registration to be capped because of available rooms for the event.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mentoring Consultancies event was cancelled because the 2020 GSA Annual Scientific Meeting moved from in-person to virtual. A five-member workgroup, appointed by the GSA leadership, reconvened after the virtual meeting to plan a virtual alternative to the Mentoring Consultancies. The Mentoring Consultancies were prioritized as a GSA event because they fulfilled an important need for career development and networking among GSA members, especially during the pandemic when these interpersonal connections were even more important and so many other activities were being curtailed. The workgroup brainstormed ideas to meet member needs and pivoted to a new virtual

career development opportunity—the Career Conversation series, which launched in Spring 2021.

Career Conversations are one-hour virtual panel discussions focusing on career development topics held on Zoom. Topics were first generated by workgroup members, and topics suggested by Career Conversation participants are added over time. Topics of interest to members at different career stages are included. The workgroup recruits three to four GSA members to serve as panelists for each topic, with a goal of assembling a diverse panel with varying career stages, disciplines, genders, races/ethnicities, and perspectives. Career Conversations are promoted through the GSA electronic newsletter and GSA Connect, the organization’s online networking platform, starting three to four weeks before the event. Pre-registration is required. The workgroup develops four to five questions that are shared with the panelists in advance of the session. The panelists are not expected to prepare any formal remarks or materials (e.g., no PowerPoint slides); rather, the discussions are conversational. A script is prepared for each Career Conversation so a workgroup member can facilitate an opening, introductions, and a closing for the event with roles clearly delineated. Two workgroup members serve as moderators and one member monitors the Zoom chat during the event to pose questions from participants. Each panelist is asked to prepare a “Pearl of Wisdom” to share with the participants to bring the panel discussion to a close. The Career Conversations are recorded and are available on demand on the GSA website (<https://www.geron.org/meetings-events/career-conversations>), creating a durable product that can be easily accessed by those unable to join the live event. Immediately following the Career Conversation, attendees receive a brief survey asking whether they found the format

useful, suggestions for improvement, and recommendations for topics for future Career Conversations. Panelists receive a note of thanks by email and are asked to provide feedback about their experience as a panelist. Five Career Conversations were delivered during 2021 and are described in Table 1. Attendance has ranged from 24-42 members, which represents about 50% of registrants for each event.

The workgroup meets after each Career Conversation to review feedback and plan the next Career Conversation. After the second Career Conversation, the workgroup added two GSA ESPO members to integrate early career perspectives and coordinate with GSA ESPO activities. The first Career Conversation hosted four panelists. However, subsequent events were limited to three panelists to allow sufficient time for panelist and attendee participation. Attendees typically pose more questions than can be addressed during the Career Conversation. Unfortunately, attempts to continue the Career Conversations through the GSA Connect networking platform following the live events have been largely unsuccessful. Session feedback indicated that members desire more opportunities for active participation and small group engagement. In response, the workgroup planned and delivered a virtual Mentoring Consultancies event using Zoom. Twelve breakout rooms were created, each with one facilitator/mentor and up to 10 mentees. Each room had a mentoring topic for discussion and breakouts lasted 35 minutes. This format prioritized the small group active interaction to complement the Career Conversations events. In response to the success of these events, GSA leadership requested that the workgroup increase the frequency of the Career Conversations and that the virtual Mentoring Consultancies continue even after the Annual Scientific Meeting returns to in-person programming.

Table 1

Career Conversations Delivered in 2021

Topic	GSA Member Panelists	Guiding Questions for the Panel Discussion
Mentorship: Developing Reciprocal and Productive Mentoring Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two university professors who received mentoring awards from GSA Two post-doctoral fellows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What makes for an effective mentor? How are these relationships reciprocal? What makes a good mentor-mentee relationship? Does a mentor need to be a friend (boundaries)? What about employer/employee relationships? How can the mentor and the mentee foster a reciprocal and productive relationship? What strategies work when the mentor and mentee are not at the same location (or need for virtual mentoring)? Too flexible/being too rigid, accountability, timelines, meeting frequency and structure How can I approach a potential mentor? How do you start and establish these relationships? How do you communicate dissatisfaction in a relationship or end a mentoring relationship?
Moving into Academic Leadership Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University president Dean Department chairperson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What drove you to move into an academic leadership role? How did you know the time or opportunity was right? What have the tradeoffs been in moving into a leadership role? Can you maintain scholarship productivity while in these roles? How do you craft the narrative about any gaps in your scholarship while in a leadership role? What skill sets are most valuable to you for your leadership role? What are your recommendations to prepare for an academic leadership role? Where is a good place to start to dip your toe into academic leadership (low risk opportunities)? As you move beyond the department level how do you facilitate success across disciplines that are not your own? Has your perspective as a gerontologist played a role in your success in academic leadership?
Non-academic Careers in Gerontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senior program officer of a foundation Program manager with the Veterans Health Administration Healthcare analyst with a large health insurance company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did you get into a non-academic career? What was the most driving or pivotal experience/reason that drove you to this decision? What opportunities are out there for gerontologists in the non-academic setting (variations by discipline, level of training, credentialing)? What are the most impactful opportunities across sectors: healthcare, public health, aging services, government, industry? Is there a resource that you would recommend for finding non-academic careers in aging? What marketable and transferrable skills that you acquired during graduate training are you using most in your current work? Reflect on the cultural differences in workplaces and how norms of non-academic careers differ from the norms of academia.

Table 1 (continued)

Career Conversations Delivered in 2021

Topic	GSA Member Panelists	Guiding Questions for the Panel Discussion
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did your mentor do during your graduate program to help you prepare for a non-academic career? How can graduate advisors support their trainees interested in non-academic careers in gerontology?
75 Years of Building the Field of Gerontology: Where We Were, and Where We're Going	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three GSA distinguished leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our webinar today is focused on celebrating GSA's 75 years of building gerontology. We know you've all had successful careers focused on aging. How did you get to where you are? • This year's title at the GSA conference is "Disruption to Transformation: Aging in the 'New Normal'", what does the new normal mean for careers in gerontology? • What advice would you share with students and early career professionals looking to build a successful career in gerontology? • Looking forward, what do you think the future holds for the field of gerontology?
Building Your Professional Network in Gerontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An early career, a mid-career and a late career gerontologist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does having a professional network look like/mean to you? • What have you gained from investing in relationships through your network? What have you contributed? • What advice do you have for those interested in growing and sustaining their professional network? What role might social media play? What role might organizations like GSA play? How have your strategies adapted during the pandemic? • How has your professional network evolved over the course of your career?

In its second year, the workgroup expanded to 14 members to accommodate the increase in programming. Additional Career Conversations are planned on topics including Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Aging, Negotiating Your First Academic Job, the Non-financial Side of Planning for Your Retirement, and How to Get the Most Out of Your Post-doctoral Fellowship. Additional virtual Mentoring Consultancies events are in the planning stages.

Recommendations

Mentoring is an important professional development activity for pre-doctoral, early-, and mid-career scholars. The mentoring model described in this paper reflects the group's evolution and strategy for embedding formal mentorship activities into a professional society's existing programming during the pandemic. Organizations may consider the following recommendations when designing and implementing similar programs. Specifically, these recommendations give insight into how to remain current with the membership, ways to effectively engage members, opportunities to highlight the contributions of members less prominently visible across the organization, and ways to ensure meaningful activities are offered to support the field.

Recommendation One: Find the Appropriate Format. While organizational leadership and planning groups may believe they know event formats most attractive to and appropriate for their membership, it is important to gather feedback from a broader group of stakeholders. As seen in the context of Career Conversations, obtaining feedback from panelists and participants influenced the event content and the frequency and format of event delivery. While this feedback was important to accommodate the needs, interests, and preferences of the membership, these pivots were pursued because they were

aligned with the workgroup's expanding composition and available tools and resources. It is important for organizations to balance what is requested by members and what is feasible for the organization to accommodate with funds and human power. In the case of Career Conversations, feedback led to smaller breakout rooms, limited pre-determined questions for panelists, and an informal tone, which increased group dialogue and one-to-one career guidance.

Recommendation Two: Take Advantage of Virtual Engagement. Professional organizations leverage their in-person annual meetings and conferences for exposing trainees, post-docs, and early-career faculty to professional development programming. Unfortunately, traditional face-to-face meetings have declined due to the pandemic, making professional development programming a challenge. This challenge became an opportunity to design multiple career conversations in webinar format that could be archived and accessed on demand. Through virtual engagement, events were no longer limited by travel, geography, or conference registration for members to receive professional development content. Participants could register from around the globe to garner wisdom from leaders within the fields of gerontology and aging.

Recommendation Three: Ensure Representation across the Career Spectrum in Planning. Mentorship takes place both vertically (e.g., student and professor) and horizontally (e.g., peer). Professional associations often rely on their members to volunteer their service to specific workgroups or initiatives. Formalizing participation in the workgroup across career stages can serve a dual purpose within an organization by creating: (1) a built-in apparatus to facilitate mentoring relationships, and (2) an additional opportunity for professional service, which can be added to a

curriculum vitae. Incorporating the perspectives of students, as well as early-, mid-, and late-career professionals, in program development provides a pipeline for workgroup involvement and shifts in mentoring capacity as individuals move through their careers.

Recommendation Four: Ensure Diversity among Leadership. To effectively engage and retain members, diversity must be reflected in the leadership's composition. The Mentoring Consultancies were successful because of diversity in the career experiences, research interests, membership years in GSA, perspectives, and demographics (e.g., ethnicity, age) among its workgroup members. The commitment to diversity was equally reflected among panelists and speakers recruited for each session. As seen in the case of Mentorship Consultancies and Career Conversations, the original five-member workgroup was expanded to 14 members to better reflect the diversity within GSA.

Recommendation Five: Develop Mechanisms to Align Content, Incorporate Feedback, and Document Success. When offering activities and events related to mentoring and professional development, it is important to understand the organizational structure so content can be aligned with the interests and needs of its membership. For example, efforts should inventory the active membership by discipline and rank as well as their involvement in sections, caucuses, and special interest groups supported by the organization. Emerging issues as well as research and practice priorities should be noted as important topics and context for events and activities. Gathering this information is helpful to plan activities and events with the most engaging, relevant, and desired content and speakers. After hosting activities and events, it is important to solicit feedback from the organizers, speakers, and

participants. Determine what went well and identify opportunities for improvement. These stakeholders should be asked about the event format, timing, duration, types of attendees, participant engagement, and recommendations for stronger impact. Efforts should focus on incorporating this feedback to advance the mentorship and professional development activities and events in the organization. In addition to feedback, organizers should document metrics pertaining to their efforts such as the number of activities and events hosted, qualifications of the speakers, number of attendees, types of members who attended from different sections/groups (including students), and attendee satisfaction. Taken together, these recommendations will enhance the organization's mentorship and professional development efforts to: (1) ensure they are meaningful to the membership; (2) justify continued action and adaptations for future events; and (3) receive support from the organization and its leaders for this purpose.

Conclusion

GSA has a significant track record of supporting gerontologists at various career stages through career development and mentoring programming. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the delivery of in-person programs, GSA developed the virtual Career Conversations program and pivoted to a virtual format for its Mentoring Consultancies. Lessons learned may be useful to other organizations in their efforts to strengthen mentoring and career development programming for their members.

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