

Finding Our Way Together: How Peer Mentoring Helped Us Navigate Early Academic Career Challenges

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Abstract

While navigating an academic journey, each individual will have unique challenges and hurdles in their career. This was no exception for our group of researchers that met during the peer mentorship component of the virtual COMPASS program. This article offers unique perspectives on how peer mentoring helped us overcome the challenges we encountered as early-career academic researchers.

Introduction

Humans have migrated around the world throughout history in search of new opportunities, ambitions, and a better quality of life. We are researchers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds who relocated—either from another country to the United States or from one state to another—to pursue academic careers. Along this journey, we have faced physical, mental, emotional, social, cultural, and financial challenges, each distinct in its way, regardless of whether we moved internationally or domestically. Despite these difficulties, we continued on our paths, motivated by our ambitions and aspirations for a better career. Today, as we reflect on our experience, we are each at various stages of our careers and pathways towards our aspirations. Regardless, we found a support system that is common to our experience in helping us navigate through the individual journey—a peer support system.

We learned the value of the peer-support system during a ten-week mentorship training program, COMPASS, which included frequent interactions within randomly assigned peer-mentoring group members followed by collective knowledge-sharing interactive sessions with a broader cohort of participants at a similar career stage. During these sessions, we shared our experiences and swapped wisdom learned while navigating our individual academic journeys. We realized that although our journey is shaped by our unique social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds, the presence of a supportive peer network was a common factor that eased our struggles. In this article, we share our personal stories, highlighting how the peer support system has helped us manage these challenges.

Workflow Woes and the Myth of Having It All Together

Ayland Letsinger

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Wiki pages, Notion, Loop, Teams, Slack, Calendars, Clouds, Zotero, Slack... I had a whole year to prepare my new laboratory, and yet, I found the timer ticking as I struggled to navigate all the workflow options. Online, it seemed like everyone had their systems dialed in – streamlined, efficient, optimized for tenure. This whole time, I thought knowing how to write a grant was going to be the hard part!

Then came the unexpected: resources I hadn't considered, like laboratory manuals detailing everything from vacation policies to etiquette expectations. Reading through examples, sometimes extending 50 pages or more, I realized I had scientific and social “values” that were not well fleshed out. Should students formally email me when they are taking time off? Should students upload notes from meetings? Do students NEED to know my explicit scientific values? Would students be at a disadvantage without this information – or would I be oversharing and stifling their growth as independent scientists? I loved my doctoral laboratory, and we had none of these things. My advisor was even honored university-wide for exceptional mentorship, but was that an outdated way of doing science? I could not stand the uncertainty.

At this time, a colleague recommended I join the COMPASS Program and invest in the peer mentoring sessions. I worried I had no value structures to share with others and would be embarrassed in group discussions by how far behind I was. It did not take long to realize that this group was the place to develop those values. Suggested meeting prompts (e.g. how would you handle a disagreement between two graduate students in the laboratory) appeared trivial at first, yet consistently sparked meaningful dialogue and diverse insights. Week after week, I realized we were all in the same boat, and simply taking the time to articulate our thoughts together helped reveal our personal values. What I enjoyed most was seeing how each of us had our own experiences working through a postdoctoral fellowship. The variability helped me understand that no one size fits all, especially when it comes to what is “right.”

Now, I realize that iteration is the norm. We all learn on the fly, and just thinking through common sticking points and hearing unique stories helped me relax. I no longer TRY to chase the ephemeral, perfect system. Instead, I am learning to value the process of building a system that works for who I currently am as a mentor and scientist. That shift in mindset has made all the difference.

You Don't Possess It All– But Together, We Might!

Chandrashekhar Borkar, Ph.D.

As a postdoc fellow in the Fadok Lab at Tulane University, I was writing my first NIH grant submission. I struggled to scribble down my thoughts but that quickly led to panic as the deadline loomed. The approaching deadline forced me to seek my mentor Dr. Fadok's help. In addition to encouragement and support, he shared some of his earlier grant proposals and pointed me to other accomplished scientists. Despite my initial hesitation, rooted in lack of personal connections, cultural and language differences, and lack of precedent, I reached out to them. However, talking to them proved to be invaluable, helped me to structure my thoughts according to the grant program guidelines and got much needed documents to refer from these scientists. It was a profound sigh of relief.

The challenges become tougher at your next career state. Starting your own lab is as difficult as trying to master a dozen skills at once. You stand under a self-loathing pile of expectations, a conflicting list of idealized roles thrown at you: inspiring leader, proficient lab manager, team builder, and great scientist. Under these demanding, idyllic identities you are expected to embody simultaneously, but these myriad expectations are utterly overwhelming. However, a good part of being in academia is that you have mentors and peers to hold on to and get through it. One of such helping hands I got through COMPASS peer-mentoring training. It helped me realize what's out there is not only an ocean of challenges, but also several light houses to direct you out of nowhere. Look for them! You don't have to invent the wheel yet again, but just learn how it works and customize it to your needs. I discovered, from them, a wealth of helpful resources, ranging from time management guides and lab manuals to best practices for student care. This significantly shaped my perspective on academic journeys when I knew nothing about their existence.

A special part of this program was it provided multilevel support from special guests to share their experience, and a valuable perspective from the organizers to significant mutual peer mentoring that fills gaps traditional mentorship couldn't. I had my vulnerabilities, outsider feeling as a first gen immigrant and imposter syndrome to deal with when starting with the peer group, but I could quickly realize a fresh perspective I may bring to the table. I remember strikingly, in one of the important COMPASS sessions a guest speaker mentioned not to rely on a single mentor but to have a rubric of mentors. Each one of them is designed to get help for different domains, ranging from personal to professional challenges. You can find suitable people to contribute to your individual development plans, writing buddies or just community friends to share your wins and failures to decompress yourself.

Peers, Not Publications, Will Make or Break Your Postdoctoral Fellowship

Emily K. Sullivan, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LBA

Hearing a Ph.D. was in the cards 10 years ago would have made me audibly laugh. My cards included struggling to identify a field I was passionate about pursuing and to complete my undergraduate degree requirements. After years of shuffling my cards between medicine, neuroscience, and psychology, they serendipitously scattered and led me to behavior analysis. Interestingly enough, behavior analysis is a science rooted in determinism, suggesting that we are dealt our hand for a reason. Thus, as Murray Sidman stated, "if the world was going to change, people would have to change" (Sidman, 2007, p. 310).

Pursuing a Ph.D. seemed like a logical answer to this call; an advanced education would be my change. Due to a series of unfortunate circumstances, I moved across the country to complete my degree. My advisor at the time told me that this risk would "ruin my career." Although I went against the advice of others, investing in myself and taking this leap was the reason I completed my degree, a critical factor in building the career I want. But a great mentor directly shared that a degree would not be enough, and there are no guarantees. To leverage the best possible outcome, I was advised to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship.

I began my postdoctoral fellowship without even knowing what a "postdoc" really was. What I quickly learned, however, is that its impact cannot be reduced to a line on a curriculum vitae. Initially, for me, it was a year to achieve research milestones. Achievements that would not have

been realized without the colleagues beside me, especially the one I was lucky enough to share an office with.

From the start, it was clear that she surpassed me in academic qualifications, yet what proved most valuable was not her expertise alone, but her honesty, generosity, and willingness to navigate the realities of academia with candor. In a culture often marked by competition, our differing specialties helped mitigate potential tension and foster genuine support.

As a behavior analyst, I am acutely aware that we shape the cultures in which we work. The culture of academia often perpetuates an environment of extreme pressure and scarcity, where productivity is prioritized above all else. Yet my experience underscored that persistence in this environment depends far more on community than on individual achievement. Mentorship is critical, but equally vital is the presence of peers who, without obligation, encourage us to persist.

The daily challenges of academia are unrelenting. Formal support systems can dissolve, and success is rarely achieved in isolation. My own progress is inseparable from the network of colleagues who bolstered me when I faltered. While competitive action may be commonplace, I attribute every achievement to the collective contributions of those who chose to invest in my success. The generosity, encouragement, and solidarity of my office mate are what truly made this postdoc year not only survivable but meaningful.

Navigating social life with peers is a pathway to academic success in the U.S.

Bijesh Mishra, PhD,

I moved from Nepal to the United States (US) in pursuit of quality higher education. Upon my arrival at Lexington Regional Airport in Kentucky, I was picked up by my major advisor. After spending the first night in his home, one of his MS students picked me up and brought me to my next stop: his apartment. This was just the beginning of my dependency on peer support for almost everything in daily life—grocery shopping trips, commuting, driving lessons, social security office visits, utility set-up, figuring out shopping outlets, navigating cultural differences, and many more. I was fortunate to have a friend who grew up living in an American culture and taught me to navigate through a new lifestyle and culture that I had never experienced before. My early days in the US became smooth and easy because of peer support, which in turn became supportive in navigating my MS journey. However, I was the only Nepali student in the college. After a few weeks of college, my life started to feel like a routine of going to college and work, returning home, speaking a foreign language, eating the same food, and having a lack of a social life. I started missing my Nepali lifestyle, friends, family, and neighborhood that I was used to for more than two decades in Nepal. For example, I started to miss street food that I used to enjoy on evening walks, exchanging greetings with seniors, short talks with friends and neighbors on morning and evening walks, and similar brief moments that made me forget tiredness after a long day. However, deep inside my heart, I started to feel empty as I was unaware of what I was missing and what I lacked in my life. To some extent, the busy routine of figuring out daily life in the US, work, and school kept my mind occupied and made me forget about my life in Nepal, but still, the feeling of emptiness as a result of cultural and lifestyle change shock was getting deeper. After a deeper feeling of emptiness for a longer period of time,

I started to doubt if I made the right choice by moving to the US and if the ambition is worth the opportunity cost it comes with while navigating the journey.

After about six months, one of my friends from whom I had happened to know before I came to the US joined a distant university, and a second Nepali friend joined my university. This gave me a cushion of a friend circle with whom I can enjoy a common type of food, speak in my own language, share common values, and culture that I was used to. This helped me build a circle of peers who have a common culture and similar life experiences. It became a daily routine to talk with these friends over the phone, share our daily stories of walking through streets, navigating traffic, a shop selling food and spices that I like, and lots of “how-to” tips to navigate daily life, and many more. Each of us experienced some sort of unique challenges daily, but generally a common one in nature. For example, an international student appearing in a driving learner's permit test and navigating through the process is a common experience we learned from each other, but these processes are unique to the cities that we lived in, which need some research on our own. Navigating through these types of daily life hurdles became easier as we started sharing our experiences with peers, guided each other based on experiences, and shared lessons learned in the process.

These peer partnerships helped us navigate daily life and took some of our homesickness away us. While doing so, regular talks with peers also refreshed our minds by removing stress from classes and hectic work, preparing us for the next busy day. As we get more used to the lifestyle and routine, we start to adopt hobbies from our peers and enjoy them together. For example, one of my friends would like to hike and do natural photography, while another friend would like to go to the movies and shop for merchandise. As a friend circle, we went to movies, shopping, hiking, and photography together, making each of these as separate fun activities in our weekly, bimonthly, or monthly routine. These activities made us refreshed, and helped build a support system that eases our lives in the US with peers. After about a year, more new Nepali friends joined the university, expanding the community circle with similar cultural values and experience, making our on-campus and off-campus life much easier.

Moving forward, this peer circle became a network of colleagues to discuss assignments, formulate and refine research ideas, and build understanding of subject matter in the curriculum. As the homesickness and cultural shocks drifted away, I started expanding my peer network inside the university for professional and career development. For example, I started engaging academically with students from diverse ethnicities from North and South American, African, Australian, and Asian countries. We jointly started sharing knowledge on CV development, seeking PhD and/or job opportunities, sharing job interview experiences, and much more. These shared experiences with a multicultural group of people helped me develop the professional and multicultural competencies necessary to advance my academic career in the US. A peer support system that I built since the beginning of my academic journey, to the most recently formed network of colleagues after the completion of a peer mentorship program, has become a support network to navigate through the ups and downs of my academic career.

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