VMBARS MEDICINE FIELD GUIDE

# The Mentorship Map for Medicine

A practical system for building a portfolio of relationships that helps you learn, contribute, make decisions, and navigate medicine without asking one person to be everything.

**PURPOSE**

A mentor is not a vending machine for answers, introductions, letters, or opportunities. Mentorship is a developmental relationship built through fit, trust, evidence, contribution, candor, and follow-through. This guide helps you identify the relationships you need, approach people with respect, and compound the value over time.

## The relationship loop

| 1. Define | 2. Map | 3. Contribute | 4. Earn | 5. Compound |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Name the decision, capability, or transition. | Identify existing relationships, gaps, and appropriate people. | Offer credible value and arrive prepared. | Deliver, seek feedback, and earn the next commitment. | Close loops, share results, give credit, and stay useful. |

### This guide applies to:

- premedical applicants, medical students, research trainees, residents, and career changers;
- formal mentorship programs and relationships that develop organically;
- near-peer, faculty, research, specialty, identity, career, and sponsorship relationships.

**CORE PRINCIPLE**

Treat the relationship, not the message, as the unit of optimization. The goal is not to secure a mentor label. It is to build a trustworthy pattern of learning, contribution, and mutual respect.

# 1. Build a portfolio, not a mythical perfect mentor

Different people can help with different forms of learning and access. One relationship may serve several functions, but no individual owes you every function.

| Relationship function | What it provides | Who may fit |
|---|---|---|
| Near-peer navigator | Recent, practical knowledge about a stage you are approaching | Student, resident, fellow, research assistant, or recent applicant |
| Craft teacher | Observation, instruction, deliberate practice, and feedback on a capability | Faculty member, supervisor, clinician, researcher, staff expert, or skilled peer |
| Research or methods adviser | Scientific framing, methods, standards, interpretation, and quality control | PI, methodologist, librarian, statistician, data scientist, or experienced collaborator |
| Career or specialty guide | Field knowledge, tradeoffs, fit, training routes, and decision criteria | Practitioner or trainee with relevant, current experience |
| Context or identity mentor | Perspective on navigating identity, culture, access, family, finances, or nontraditional paths | Someone with relevant lived experience and sound judgment |
| Truth-teller | Candid pattern recognition, challenge, and accountability | Trusted person who knows your work and will not flatter you |
| Connector | A relevant introduction when fit and trust are established | Peer, faculty member, alumni contact, community leader, or collaborator |
| Sponsor or champion | Uses credibility and influence to advocate for an opportunity | Senior person with direct knowledge of your readiness and work |

**MENTORSHIP IS NOT THERAPY, SUPERVISION, OR SPONSORSHIP**

A mentor may care deeply and still be the wrong person for mental-health care, formal clinical supervision, legal advice, evaluation disputes, or institutional complaints. Sponsorship also requires someone to risk reputation on your behalf; it should follow evidence, not a cold request.

# 2. Define what you need now

'I need a mentor' is too broad to guide a useful relationship. Start with the decision, capability, exposure, or transition in front of you.

| Need | Useful question |
|---|---|
| Decision | What consequential choice am I making, and what information or perspective is missing? |
| Capability | What do I need to become able to do, and who can observe or teach it? |
| Field knowledge | What do I misunderstand about the work, incentives, culture, or training path? |
| Feedback | Which recent performance, artifact, or pattern needs informed review? |
| Opportunity | What evidence of readiness must exist before someone could responsibly recommend me? |
| Context | Which lived experience, institutional knowledge, or constraint changes the decision? |
| Accountability | What commitment needs a review point and an honest witness? |

## Write the mentorship objective

Over the next _____, I need to become better able to _____.

The evidence or perspective I am missing is _____.

The smallest useful next interaction would be _____.

**DO NOT OUTSOURCE THE DECISION**

Ask a mentor to improve your model, challenge assumptions, expose options, and help define evidence. Keep ownership of your choice unless the person holds legitimate supervisory or decision authority.

# 3. Map the relationships you already have

Start with people who have observed your work, share relevant context, or sit one step ahead. Existing trust often produces better guidance than distant prestige.

| Person / relationship | Function | Evidence of fit | Current state | Next useful step |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
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## Relationship-state test

| State | Evidence |
|---|---|
| Aware | You know of each other, but there is little shared context or observed work. |
| Conversation | You have exchanged context and learned about interests, goals, or work. |
| Contribution | You have delivered something useful, helped solve a problem, or followed through on advice. |
| Developmental | The person has observed growth over time and provides recurring feedback or guidance. |
| Advocacy-ready | The person can describe your relevant evidence, limitations, and readiness to others. |

## Look for structural gaps

- Do all advisers come from the same institution, specialty, career stage, or background?
- Are you missing someone who understands your constraints or can challenge the dominant view?
- Whose work is invisible in your map: coordinators, nurses, staff, librarians, analysts, patients, community leaders, or peers?

**VISIBILITY IS NOT TRUST**

A follow, title, alumni connection, event interaction, or accepted request is not yet a mentoring relationship. Describe the relationship from observable history rather than aspiration.

# 4. Approach through relevance and contribution

A strong approach makes it easy to understand who you are, why this person is relevant, what you have already done, and what modest next step you are requesting.

| Move | Question |
|---|---|
| Recover history | What shared context, prior interaction, referral, work, or genuine point of connection exists? |
| Contribute | What useful question, synthesis, resource, introduction, assistance, or specific appreciation can you offer without manufacturing value? |
| Discover | What are this person's goals, constraints, current work, and preferred way of engaging? |
| Earn the next step | What is the smallest useful commitment: a reply, 15-25 minute conversation, review of one question, or permission to follow up? |
| Conversation | What do you need to learn, and what context will make the time useful? |
| Compound | How will you apply the advice, share the result, give credit, and preserve a reason for future contact? |

## A focused outreach structure

| Line | Purpose |
|---|---|
| Context | A genuine shared-history anchor, referral, or specific engagement with the person's work. |
| Relevance | Why their experience fits the question better than generic prestige. |
| Evidence | What you have already learned, tried, built, or contributed. |
| One ask | A bounded request with an easy way to decline. |

**AVOID THE EXTRACTION SCRIPT**

Do not lead with 'pick your brain,' a broad request to 'be my mentor,' multiple asks, premature Calendly links, or claims of familiarity that the relationship has not earned. Respect nonresponse and avoid repetitive no-value follow-ups.

# 5. Make the conversation worth the time

Preparation should improve the conversation without turning it into a performance. Know what you want to learn, but leave room for the person's judgment and lived experience.

## The mentorship conversation brief

| Field | Prepare |
|---|---|
| Objective | The decision, capability, or transition you are trying to understand. |
| Current model | What you currently believe, what you have tried, and where uncertainty remains. |
| Evidence | Relevant experience, work product, results, feedback, constraints, or options. |
| Questions | Three to five questions that require this person's perspective rather than public information. |
| Contribution | A concrete way you can be useful, now or later, without forcing reciprocity. |
| Close | What you will do next, whether another step is useful, and how you will report back. |

## Questions that invite judgment

- What do people at my stage tend to misunderstand about this path?
- What evidence would make you more or less confident in this option?
- Which tradeoff am I underweighting?
- What would you test before making a larger commitment?
- If you were reviewing my current work, what would you want to see next?

## Close clearly

- Reflect back the main takeaway and your next action.
- Confirm any commitment, introduction, review, or follow-up. Do not imply one that was not offered.
- End on time. Ask before extending the conversation.

**ADVICE IS NOT AN ASSIGNMENT**

A mentor's view is one informed input. Record the assumptions and context behind it, compare it with other evidence, and decide what applies to your situation.

# 6. Earn trust through follow-through

The fastest way to weaken a promising relationship is to ask for thoughtful guidance, disappear, and return only when you need something. Close the loop while the advice is still connected to action.

| Timing | Follow-through |
|---|---|
| Within 24-48 hours | Thank them specifically, capture the advice accurately, and confirm only the commitments actually made. |
| When you act | Apply the guidance, preserve attribution, and record what changed. |
| When a result exists | Share a concise advice -> action -> result update, including what remains unresolved. |
| At a natural event | Reconnect around a milestone, publication, role change, relevant resource, mutual interest, or useful contribution. |
| When plans change | Communicate early, own the change, and reschedule or close the loop rather than disappearing. |
| When the relationship is quiet | Treat silence as information. Do not manufacture urgency or send repetitive check-ins without value. |

## The compounding update

| Advice | Action | Result | Next question or contribution |
|---|---|---|---|
| What guidance or perspective mattered? | What did you do differently? | What happened, including limits or changed thinking? | What is now useful to ask, share, or offer? |
| | | | |

**GIVE CREDIT ACCURATELY**

Acknowledge teaching, introductions, review, coordination, and other help. Do not inflate someone's role, imply endorsement, name them publicly, use a testimonial, or claim collaboration without permission.

# 7. Make expectations discussable

Recurring mentorship improves when expectations are explicit enough to prevent avoidable disappointment and flexible enough to evolve.

| Expectation | Clarify |
|---|---|
| Purpose | What development, decision, capability, or project is the relationship supporting? |
| Cadence | One conversation, a defined project, periodic check-ins, or as-needed contact? |
| Preparation | What should the trainee send or complete before each interaction? |
| Feedback | How direct should it be? What work may be reviewed? How will action be demonstrated? |
| Communication | Preferred channel, response expectations, scheduling method, and what counts as urgent. |
| Confidentiality | What may be shared, quoted, attributed, recorded, or retained? |
| Evaluation and conflicts | Does the mentor supervise, grade, hire, select, treat, or otherwise hold formal authority? |
| Review or exit | When will both parties assess fit, adjust the arrangement, pause, or conclude it? |

## When asking for a letter, introduction, or advocacy

- Ask whether the person can support you strongly and specifically; give enough time and an easy way to decline.
- Provide the opportunity, deadline, criteria, current materials, relevant work, and the evidence they directly observed.
- Never draft praise the person cannot substantiate or treat an introduction as an endorsement.
- Report the outcome and thank the people who helped, whether or not you were selected.

**ADVOCACY FOLLOWS LEGIBILITY**

A sponsor can advocate responsibly when your readiness, work, judgment, and follow-through are visible. Build evidence before asking someone to spend reputation on your behalf.

# 8. Protect boundaries and repair when needed

Mentoring relationships can be generous and still carry power, ambiguity, conflict, disappointment, or harm. Gratitude does not remove your right to appropriate boundaries.

| Situation | Possible response |
|---|---|
| Advice conflicts | Identify differences in goals, context, standards, or assumptions. Seek another informed perspective and retain decision ownership. |
| The relationship becomes transactional | Reset expectations and contribution. If every interaction is an ask, reduce frequency and rebuild substance. |
| Commitments are repeatedly missed | Name the pattern, clarify whether the relationship should change, and stop relying on an unstable dependency. |
| Credit, authorship, or ownership is unclear | Use the applicable project, journal, institutional, or contribution policy. Document work and discuss expectations early. |
| Confidential information is involved | Use approved systems and channels; do not share protected or sensitive material merely because the person is trusted. |
| The mentor also evaluates you | Recognize the dual role. Seek an additional confidential adviser for questions you cannot safely explore in the evaluative relationship. |
| Conduct feels biased, coercive, exploitative, retaliatory, or unsafe | Protect immediate safety, document observable facts, seek confidential support, and use the appropriate institutional channel. |
| The relationship has run its course | Express specific appreciation, close open commitments, name what you learned, and allow the relationship to change without forcing continued cadence. |

## A repair conversation

- Name the shared purpose and the observable pattern.
- Explain the effect without assigning motives you cannot verify.
- Ask for the other person's view and propose a specific adjustment.
- Agree on what happens next, including pause or exit if fit cannot be restored.

**MENTORSHIP IS NOT IMMUNITY**

Prestige, seniority, generosity, or prior help does not excuse misconduct or make every request appropriate. Use trusted support and established reporting channels when the situation warrants it.

# One-page mentorship map

Current decision, capability, or transition: _____

Evidence or perspective I need: _____

| Function needed | Person / relationship | State and evidence | Next useful step |
|---|---|---|---|
| Near-peer navigation | | | |
| Craft teaching / feedback | | | |
| Research / methods | | | |
| Career / specialty | | | |
| Context / identity | | | |
| Truth-telling / accountability | | | |
| Connection / sponsorship | | | |

## Relationship action plan

| Person | Primary objective | Contribution | One ask | Follow-up trigger |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

## Portfolio check

- Where am I over-relying on one person?
- Which relationship needs follow-through rather than another ask?
- Whose perspective is missing because of hierarchy, identity, institution, specialty, geography, or career stage?
- Where can I contribute credibly without turning generosity into a transaction?

**TRACK ONLY WHAT CHANGES ACTION**

Preserve the relationship's context, commitments, advice, consent, and next natural touchpoint. Do not reduce people to pipeline stages or collect personal information without a legitimate reason.

# Further reading and scope

Use this map to build and sustain developmental relationships with honesty, contribution, and respect. It is a peer tool, not a formal institutional mentorship policy or a promise of access, advocacy, or opportunity.

## Selected sources

National Academies. The Science of Effective Mentorship in STEMM. 2019.

Sambunjak D, Straus SE, Marusic A. Mentoring in academic medicine: a systematic review. JAMA. 2006.

AAMC. Mentors and Proteges: What Proteges Bring to the Equation.

## Related VMBARS resources

- The Medical Trainee Learning Loop.
- Feedback Without Defensiveness.
- Research Project Operating Guide for Medical Trainees.

## Use the map with judgment

- Verify current institutional expectations, conflict rules, privacy requirements, and reporting channels.
- Do not confuse mentorship with clinical supervision, mental-health care, legal advice, or guaranteed advocacy.
- Allow relationships to remain informal, episodic, reciprocal, or complete when that is the honest state.

**THE STANDARD**

A strong mentorship portfolio helps you learn faster, see blind spots, make better decisions, contribute more reliably, access appropriate opportunities, and become the kind of person who can do the same for others.

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