Addressing Inequity Through “Mentee-Focused” Mentorship

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Systemic racism in the sciences and cultural biases embedded within institutional practices have resulted in, among other things, lower rates of retention,¹ fewer promotions, and lower salaries among scientists of color than their white counterparts.² Diversity-enhancement efforts have increased the number of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) but not the number of scientists of color.³ Despite racial and ethnic minorities comprising almost 40% of the US population,⁴ people of color make up only 9% (split evenly between men and women) of the doctoral-level academic STEM workforce.¹ Other disciplines with modest success at reducing racial and ethnic inequities show diversity makes organizations attractive to all applicants and enhances organizational performance, including innovation.⁵ This leads to the question of how we in medical schools, academic hospitals, and health systems can address inequities and enable scientists of color to thrive. We believe any solution must include changes to the traditional mentor-focused mentorship paradigm that prioritizes mentor goals.

Junior scientists at the pre- and post-doctoral levels often seek out senior scientists' laboratories or scientific groups to obtain mentorship and career advancement in their chosen fields. Early career scientists also rely heavily on training grants, which require a mentorship component. Yet for career advancement, research from the business world demonstrates that sponsorship—advocacy and direct promotion by senior-level mentors—is more effective than mentorship.⁶ To provide more effective mentorship for scientists of color, medical and scientific institutions must take two sequential steps.

First, we must acknowledge the role traditional mentor-focused mentorship has in producing and perpetuating inequities in STEM. Mentor-focused mentorship prioritizes the mentor's career advancement and falsely supposes worthy mentees succeed solely on their own merit. This mentorship style ignores the barriers racism and socio-economic and environmental disadvantages erect to the entry and advancement of junior scientists of color.⁷ Second, institutions must train and support senior scientists to take a different mentorship approach, one that prioritizes the mentee's career. To re-focus attention on the importance of the mentee in mentorship, we term such an approach, which is a specific blend of mentorship and sponsorship, “mentee-focused mentorship” (Fig. 1).

Mentee-focused mentorship represents a conscious shift to have mentorship centered on and driven by the goals and needs of the mentee, as defined by the mentee. It empowers the mentee with an active role in determining their own goals and paths for achieving them. As such, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach but, rather, the equivalent of medicine's person-centered care: mentorship co-produced by mentor and mentee, with success of the mentee's career as the primary objective. Mentee-focused mentorship benefits all mentees but is particularly important for junior scientists of color because it creates a collaboration to deliberately combat societally produced disadvantages.

Mentee-focused mentorship requires three distinct principles: dialog and dissent in communication, inclusion and disruption in defining goals, and proactiveness and restraint in progress toward goals. We describe these below, with a focus on how to create a collaborative relationship that disrupts traditional power structures.

1. Dialog and dissent in communication: it is critical to acknowledge that societal and institutional inequities may inhibit candid discussions within the mentoring relationship. Opportunities need to be created for a mentee's assertiveness and dissent. Having explicit, jointly agreed upon, and frequently revisited criteria for how to hold such discussions can help both mentor and mentee negotiate this assertiveness and dissent, including how and when mentor and mentee take on the equally important responsibilities of speech and active listening.

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Figure 1 Continuum of mentorship

2. Inclusion and disruption in defining goals: building in adequate structured time to include different ideas and perspectives when determining career-building opportunities to pursue is particularly important when mentor and mentee come from different backgrounds. Actively listening to each other's constructive criticism helps both mentor and mentee understand different perspectives and how, for example, what seems valuable to one party may not seem so to the other. This enables both parties to take equal ownership for the path forward. To do this effectively, both mentor and mentee must be conscious of the dominant mentorship paradigm that prioritizes the mentor's objectives and be willing to disrupt this both within and outside the mentoring relationship.
3. Proactiveness and restraint in progress toward goals: to the best of their abilities, the mentor and mentee should prepare for the future by being prescient about what skills will be needed in accomplishing the mentee's short- and long-term goals. But this need for proactiveness carries the risk of the mentor feeling empowered to act on behalf of the mentee, thereby disempowering the mentee. Both mentor and mentee must thus be vigilant. And the mentor must practice restraint to ensure progress is driven by the junior scientist of color.

Mentee-focused mentorship is not currently the predominant path. It is consequently disruptive and therefore requires explicit institutional recognition, support, and oversight. We suggest the following.

1. Explicit incorporation of the three principles in senior scientists' career advancement and promotion criteria, as measured, for example, by junior scientists evaluating mentors using standardized, routine evaluations based on these principles.
2. Protected time for mentors to engage in mentee-focused mentorship, enabled, for example, through reductions in committee or other administrative responsibilities for mentors who demonstrate adherence to the principles as described by evaluation (see no. 1).
3. Explicit institution-wide training in mentee-focused mentorship, conducted collaboratively by and for mentors and mentees. This also serves to publicize institutional support for this approach.
4. Academic and other awards celebrating successes of mentee-focused mentorship, especially for collaborating dyads or other teams.
5. Explicit institutional structures that support time-intensive mentoring relationships by engaging a cadre of mid- and senior-level scientists as mentors and ensuring, for example, each junior scientist has at least one scientific mentor and one career mentor.
6. Oversight of institutional progress, including systematic data collection focused on the adoption, spread, and outcomes of mentee-focused mentorship.

This type of institutional investment can lay a stronger, more just foundation that promotes greater inclusion and advancement of scientists of color.

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