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TWELVE TIPS

Twelve tips for early career medical educators

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Abstract

The first 10 years of career development pose unique challenges for MD- and PhD-trained faculty members working in medical education. These may include publishing peer-reviewed articles, winning grant funding, teaching, maintaining a clinical practice, and supporting professional communities both within and external to their institution. As the inaugural and current leaders of the ECME group in Canada, we have actively sought to better understand the challenges ECME faculty members face. We developed this understanding by surveying and tracking the qualitative reports of our ECME members, reviewing the (limited) literature available on ECME faculty members' experiences, and learning from our own experiences as ECME faculty and the advice shared by our own mentors. In this paper, we consolidate this knowledge into 12 tips for ECME faculty members. We suggest these tips will benefit both MD- and PhD-trained ECME faculty members as they strive for professional success.

Introduction

The first 10 years of career development pose unique challenges for MD- and PhD-trained faculty members working in medical education. These early career medical educators (ECME) must fulfill multiple professional expectations for promotion. These may include publishing peer-reviewed articles, winning grant funding, teaching, maintaining a clinical practice, and supporting professional communities both within and external to their institution. As this list suggests, conducting rigorous, and/or trustworthy scholarship is often a necessary condition for enabling success, but it is not sufficient.

As the inaugural (Varpio) and current (Cristancho) leaders of the ECME group in Canada, we have actively sought to better understand the challenges ECME faculty members face. We developed this understanding by surveying and tracking the qualitative reports of our ECME members, reviewing the literature available on ECME faculty members' experiences, and learning from our own experiences as ECME faculty. We have further nuanced this understanding by organizing and participating in the ECME-focused mentoring and networking events (held annually from 2010 to present) at the Canadian Conference for Medical Education, and by learning from the advice shared by our own mentors. In this paper, we consolidate this knowledge into 12 tips for ECME faculty members. We suggest these tips will benefit both MD- and PhD-trained ECME faculty members as they strive for professional success.

Tip 1

Articulate your area(s) of interest

Stay committed to your decisions, but stay flexible in your approach.

– Tony Robbins

Whether interested in the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, or teaching (Boyer 1997), a profitable way to launch a career in medical education is to answer an important, fundamental question: "What career do I want to have?" Medical education offers faculty many career directions and opportunities. Chief among these are careers focused on research, teaching, or administration. Thus, answers to the aforementioned question could include developing a career as

- A researcher working within a particular area of inquiry (e.g., clinical reasoning, trainee assessment, interprofessional collaboration, activity theory, etc.)
- A course or clerkship director with a specific scholarly focus (e.g., simulation, TBL, flipped classrooms, etc.)
- A leader (e.g., centre or program director, department chair, dean, etc.)

Deciding what career to strive for is an as-of-this-moment description. It is not a constraint; instead, it is a focusing lens. By knowing the answer to this question, ECME faculty can examine each opportunity that presents itself to determine if it helps to fulfill the larger career goal.

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These decisions must be carefully considered. Every institution has needs that must be met – courses need to be taught, accreditation must be maintained, and administrative responsibilities need to be fulfilled. ECME faculty members must do their part in meeting these requirements. However, when offered any such opportunity, the challenge is to find a way to achieve a win–win situation. More often than not, there is room for negotiating *how many* of the institution’s needs you will meet and/or *how* you will be meeting them. Can a teaching load also provide a context for research? Can committee work double as an intentional start to leadership skill development? Think of how meeting the institution’s needs can simultaneously, and intentionally, support your career development.

All too often the careers of ECME faculty get derailed because the faculty member takes on too many disparate responsibilities. Taking the time to explicitly describe your own career interests is a way to start a career with the end in mind. We suggest revising the question (i.e. “What career do I want to have?”) at regular intervals. Over the course of your career, your interests will evolve, taking you in different directions. The goal is to always be clear of your overarching objective, and to let that be the guiding principle that informs your professional choices and strategies.

Tip 2

Define what is success for **you**

Build your own dreams, or someone will hire you to build theirs.

– Farrah Gray

Some markers of professional success are usually pre-defined for ECME faculty members. These may include dissemination of research findings via peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations, sustaining a clinical practice, and engaging in teaching activities. These are examples of the expectations of the professional realm – of just *one* dimension of the faculty member’s reality. To be successful, ECME scholars need to balance professional *and* personal demands. Achieving the elusive balance between career expectations and personal satisfaction is difficult, as evidenced by the wealth of self-help books dedicated to the subject. Building a path to professional and personal satisfaction might start by explicitly defining success: What aspects of my career make me feel absorbed, productive and happy? What elements of my personal life contribute to my joy and contentment? Answering these questions can help the ECME faculty member articulate their professional and personal values. Knowing which career paths you find engaging and how those relate to your personal values is very important for making early career decisions (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009).

Recent research suggests that personal flexibility is one of the advantages of careers in medical education (Hu et al, 2014). But each institution will have its own limits to that flexibility. Depending on the institution, it may be possible for ECME faculty members to successfully negotiate work-life balance into their career paths. For instance, is it possible to

negotiate an extended maternity/parental leave if you and a colleague work out a teaching load swap for a term? Can your conference presentations be limited to local level events when your children are infants? We recognize that such compromises are not always feasible; however, we have found that leaders in our community are often open to creative problem solving. By engaging in these types of conversations, you can strive to have your faculty position structured in a way that supports you in achieving your professional *and* personal goals (Castiglioni et al. 2012).

Tip 3

Create your 5-year strategic plan

People with clear, written goals accomplish far more in a shorter period of time than people without them could ever imagine.

– Brian Tracy

Having a defined interest and set of success criteria in mind is a valuable starting point, but abstract ideas need concrete action plans to be achieved. Figuring out *how* to achieve your goals can be a daunting exercise for ECME faculty members. We suggest using the SMART approach for writing goals to map out a 5-year plan (Doran et al. 1981). Here is a simple strategy that has worked for us

- With the work from Tips 1 and 2 in hand, write down a long-term vision of your career (this is the time for big dreams).
- Divide that long-term vision into five main goals.
- Treat each goal as project, and establish milestones and timelines to complete that project.
- Stay realistic by revising the plan every 4–6 months.

For example, if your long-term goal is to be a leader (say as a program director), build a plan to “walk the ladder.” Taking on lower-level positions can help you learn the roles and responsibilities of being a program director (from a ground floor view), give you insight into the institutional culture, and provide you with local credibility to earn the director position. This incremental approach can be easily (and feasibly) developed into a series of SMART goals, across a 5-year timeline.

We also suggest that you consider building and staying true to a time management style and/or technique. For example, you may consider reserving certain days for meetings and other days for your own work or skill development (e.g., days set aside for writing, or preparing for teaching, etc.).

Tip 4

Develop strong communication skills

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

– George Bernard Shaw

Whether in writing (e.g., grant submission) or orally (e.g., leading a TBL session), effective communication is essential to

the success of any faculty member. In medical education, ECME faculty members will constantly address different audiences: researchers, educators, learners, and administrators. Therefore the ability to *craft* a message to effectively reach and spark the interest of audiences is vital.

We suggest that ECME faculty members participate in the courses and workshops on academic writing and presenting that are offered through professional organizations, faculty development offices, and at conferences (Lingard & Driessen 2015). Further, there are many useful texts that can demystify effective communication (Sword 2012; Gallo 2014; Lingard 2015). Some of our most reliable strategies include

- Set aside dedicated writing days (i.e., no meetings, no calls – just you and the keyboard).
- Practice your presentations. Presenting to a local audience is a good way to work out the problems in a talk before you deliver to national or international audiences (e.g., Is the talk too long? Are your slides difficult to read?).
- Build a peer writing circle. Circulating manuscripts amongst peers for feedback is an excellent way to find weaknesses in your submissions *before* reviewers do.

Tip 5

Cultivate relationships with mentors

Colleagues are a wonderful thing – but mentors, that's where the real work gets done.

– Junot Diaz

In your career, you will want to have many different mentors. Having more than one mentor can be a real asset because not all mentors have experience in all the areas where you will be seeking advice, and not all mentors will be available when you need that advice. Cultivating relationships with multiple mentors provides a breadth of experiences and viewpoints to draw on. Each mentoring relationship is unique, and will give rise to different kinds of conversations and learning opportunities. In our experiences, our mentors have provided opportunities for discussing

- Ideas (e.g., a course, or a research project)
- Career development (e.g., which committees to be involved in, and which conferences to attend)
- Political and cultural navigation strategies (e.g., learning the culture of your institution, and how to negotiate collaborative relationships)
- More personal matters (e.g. balancing work and family responsibilities, dealing with difficult colleagues)

Keep in mind that while some mentors can advise on many different topics, some others may not feel comfortable beyond work-related topics. To decide who would be a “good fit”, consider finding mentors who have achieved goals you aspire to achieve – be that winning a particular grant, having an impressive publication record, or finding a good balance between work and private life (Castiglioni et al. 2012). Being attentive and respectful of your mentors' styles is a marker of a good mentee (see Tip 6).

There are different kinds of mentoring relationships: formal and informal (Trower 2010; Shollen et al. 2014). Formal mentoring usually involves the institution providing a structure for mentees to be matched with mentors. Informal mentoring is a more “organic” evolution of a mentoring relationship, where the mentee and the mentor find each other without the involvement of an external organization. Some research suggests that informal mentoring is more important and more effective for early career faculty than formal mentoring because it stays away from “being assigned” and moves instead towards finding a “good fit” (Trower 2010). It is important to remember that agreeing to be someone's mentor is a personal choice involving a commitment of time and energy for both the mentor and the mentee. Neither party should enter the relationship lightly. In other words, you should have explicit conversations about expectations to ensure a successful mentor–mentee relationship.

Tip 6

Be a good mentee

If you cannot see where you are going, ask someone who has been there before.

– J. Loren Norris

Just as there is etiquette for classroom behaviour and for research collaborations, there is etiquette to being a good mentee. Your mentors are giving up time to be with you so it is important to come to the meetings on time and prepared. Preparation means spending time before the meeting thinking of the specific items you'd like to discuss at your meeting. These items can be specific questions or more general problems you would like to have their advice on. Prepared also means coming to discuss the progress you've made to date on the issues you discussed previously.

But this preparation must be balanced with a respect for openness and spontaneity. Let the mentor know your goals, your weaknesses and strengths, your ideas, and your fears. You want to provide the mentor with enough context to be able to put your situation and questions into perspective. Your mentors will also have ideas and concerns that they want to share with you that are not part of your agenda. Come ready with a discussion plan, but also be ready for the mentors to direct the conversation towards other topics. Remember you came to them to hear their perspective – give them the space to show you that perspective and to show you things you may not be aware of. This is the time for candor – and candor also demands trust and confidentiality.

Mentoring relationships are some of the most important relationships you will develop in your career. You are responsible for staying in touch with your mentors and for cultivating and managing the relationship (Zerzan et al. 2009). And as it has been said time and time again, good relationships take work. You should not rush the relationship but you also do not want to be overly cautious or nervous. This means: do not focus on the outcomes (i.e., on what you want to get out of the relationship), focus on developing a strong, trusting relationship with the mentor. The rest will come.

Tip 7

Build a network of peers

I get by with a little help from my friends.
– The Beatles

One challenge that ECME faculty members face is building collaborations and supportive communities with their peers (Helms 2010). We suggest that this is a problem the ECME faculty member should address head on. The value of a community of peers cannot be overstated. Overcoming feelings of isolation, discussing challenges, and finding collaborators: all of this and more can come from participating in a community of peers. Community is something that can be conceived of beyond the local “you work in my Department too” attitude. Electronic communications have made it possible for a network of peers to extend across a country and across national borders.

People use different strategies to build their networks of peers. Some ECME faculty members are comfortable managing large networks; others prefer to start small. Regardless of the size of your circle of peers, the guiding principle should be to build a network of peers you trust. How big that network becomes is a personal choice.

We would encourage ECME scholars to think of peers as those with different training backgrounds (e.g., MD or PhD). Medical education thrives as a diverse community where clinicians and scientists form productive collaborations (Van der Vleuten 2014). Having the perspectives from peers belonging to these different backgrounds helps to situate an educational problem in both the theoretical and practical realms.

Tip 8

Craft multiple elevator pitches

There are always three speeches, for every one you actually gave. The one you practiced, the one you gave, and the one you wish you gave.
– Dale Carnegie

A good elevator pitch provides a clear idea of your interests and current activities in approximately one to two minutes. Crafting a good elevator pitch is difficult. It is a commonly held belief that an ECME faculty member must have one good elevator pitch. But, we suggest you need more than one pitch. This is an issue of knowing your audience. Different audiences have different interests. That means that your elevator pitch must be framed in a way that makes what you are saying *of interest to the listener*. We suggest crafting and practicing (yes – a mentor or a peer could help you with this) one pitch for each of the following audiences:

- Your boss (i.e., how your work is of interest to your institution)
- Your potential mentors and peers (i.e., how your work is of interest to research or educational communities)
- Your family and friends (i.e., how your work contributes to society)

Tip 9

Be a team player

The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime.

– Babe Ruth

Even before an ECME faculty member takes on a faculty position (i.e., during the hiring interview), he/she is being judged on his/her ability to be good team players. The complexity of today's work environments demands that leaders select employees by their strength in many areas, including what has been called “soft” skills: active listening, buying into the institutional vision and mission, supporting the growth of others, etc. (Klaus & Rohman 2007). Consider the following tips to enhance your team playing strategies:

- Take the time to get to know the people you work with. This includes being an active listener and having sincere interest in learning about them and their work.
- Be an open door person – literally *leave the door open*.
- Don't say “no” or “yes” as a first reaction answer. Spend some time considering the issue and reflecting on the reasons for saying yes or no. Remember, it might be possible to turn something that is a burden for someone else, into a win-win situation for you (see Tip 1). And an additional benefit could be garnering some good will from a colleague.
- Exercise small-l leadership – strive for bringing people together to get things done (Bohmer 2010).

Tip 10

Build resilience as your armor

The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.

– Nelson Mandela

Being an ECME faculty member is *not* easy. Success demands that you adapt to the constantly changing circumstances of the context – hospital administration or deanery changes, different student groups, new accreditation standards, etc. In other words, to be successful as an ECME faculty member requires resilience – the ability to recover readily from adversity or challenging situations.

As future researchers, educators, or academic leaders in medical education, we will have articles, book manuscripts, and grant proposals turned down; courses that are poorly received; talks for which audiences give you the cold shoulder. These experiences are personally and professionally difficult – and, yes, we have both experienced each of these rejections. This is when your network of mentors and peers is essential. Mentors can help you understand what went wrong so that you can improve your performance next time. Peers can help ease the sting of rejection so that you want to try again, enabling there to *be* a next time.

If we carefully observe the career trajectory of our more senior colleagues, we learn that these people possess the *skill* of being able to persist in the face of obstacles. Be attuned to how you react to challenges. If your tendency is to give up or become embittered, book a meeting with your mentor (DeCastro et al. 2013) and a phone call to a peer.

Tip 11

Understand that medical education is a **field**, not a discipline

And from their differences came understanding.

– Unknown

Joining the medical education community can be both exciting and confusing. Our community is composed of individuals who come from different disciplinary backgrounds – take us as an example: we are a rhetorician (Varpio) and an engineer (Cristancho).

One important aspect to remember about medical education is that it is a field, not a discipline. A *discipline* is usually guided by shared paradigms, assumptions, rules and methods to present their knowledge claims – i.e., people from the same discipline speak the same language. A *field* brings people from multiple disciplines – i.e., multiple paradigms – together. While a *field* can pose the challenge of living in a Tower of Babel¹, that same challenge can become an opportunity. Slowing down and engaging in conversations can provide those opportunities. Our senior colleagues have demonstrated that quality scholarship in medical education is usually the result of thoughtful conversations about differences in perspectives (Albert et al. 2007).

Tip 12

Embrace your identity as part of the medical education field

I am what I am and that's all that I am.

– Popeye

Finally, embrace your ECME identity. The medical education field has gained recognition as an academic endeavour through the efforts of all those who have accepted the challenge. Research suggests that developing and embracing an ECME identity is problematic (Lieff et al. 2012; Sabel & Archer 2014). We recognize that professional identity formation is complicated and is a life-long endeavor. To help ECME faculty members move from conceiving of their work in medical education as merely an activity, to conceiving themselves as valuable contributors to a community of scholarship, here are some strategies we have found particularly useful:

- Don't apologize for doing the work you do. It is a counter-productive habit particularly when writing grants or addressing scientific audiences.
- Strive for the best quality in your work by explicitly speaking to rigor principles, and cultivating the habit of asking for feedback.

- Be proud of what you do and don't hide your passion for your work.

Concluding comments

Medical education is a vibrant academic field that offers unique opportunities and challenges for early ECME faculty members. Indeed, the first 10 years of a career in medical education can be difficult to navigate. In writing these 12 tips, our goal is to offer some navigational directions that we have found useful as we continue to navigate our own careers.

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States of America's Department of Defense or other federal agencies.

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Note

1. A biblical analogy to represent the feeling of being surrounded by people speaking different languages and not being able to understand the words others are using.

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