



Research Letter

The Value of Protecting Research Time During Training

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Urology training is laden with the challenges of learning foundational knowledge, caring for patients, gaining procedural skills, teaching juniors, and staying abreast of the latest developments. Unfortunately, this leaves little time for research activities, particularly if a protected research component is not integrated into the training curriculum. For many, the idea of lengthening training by adding one or more years of dedicated research understandably creates pause. While academic productivity is possible without protected time, the value of dedicated research time should not be underestimated. Physicians offer a unique clinical background to research efforts, and investing in research time during training may facilitate a high-profile academic career in the future.

Why?

Protected research time unencumbered by clinical obligations during training provides individuals with a unique opportunity to explore academic interests by assessing:

- Is research for me?
- What kind of research engages me: basic, translational, clinical, or some combination thereof?
- Do I wish to become a recognized expert for a particular disease?

In addition, protected time provides an opportunity to learn new skill sets, both technical and cognitive, that can mold the way in which physicians think about critical needs in medicine. Taking additional coursework in analytical methods or research design may enhance one's research experience by providing a didactic component. Protected time affords the opportunity to invest in defining and achieving academic goals [1]. At the same time, publishing and presenting quality work at conferences serve as academic currency, which can beget further such opportunities.

When?

The optimal timing of a protected research period is worth contextualizing with an individual's needs and goals. Earlier in one's career—as a student, for example—protected research time can build one's academic portfolio from an early stage, help to formulate academic and career interests early, and confer knowledge and experience translatable to any disease process. Protecting research time later in training can enable individuals to tailor their research investment towards carving an academic niche and to begin preliminary work for grant applications [2]. The longer one is immersed in the medical field, the more evident the knowledge gaps become, allowing for more meaningful contributions.

How?

The groundwork must be laid to maximize productivity before starting a dedicated research period. Identification of areas of interest and goals, tailored to the amount of time available, is the first step. It is worth exploring the resources and strengths at one's institution and meeting with several prospective mentors before identifying an appropriate match. Formulation of a plan requires an honest assessment of the knowledge and technical skills needed to achieve one's goals along with an understanding of the resources and collaborators readily available. Finally, pursuing funding opportunities, including federal, institutional, and foundational grants, may help to offset departmental expenses while boosting one's credentials.

Conclusion

Protected research time can help budding physicians explore their academic interests and begin formulating an academic niche for themselves. Research time can provide the tools necessary to learn about a specialized area, gain recognition, and launch a desired career trajectory. To



make the most effective and productive use of research time, individuals should lay the groundwork preemptively and carefully select the right mentor(s) in advance.

Conflicts of interest: The author has nothing to disclose.

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June 18, 2019

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