

Tips for a Successful Academic Career: My Career Path

Gbenga Ogedegbe, MD

RAISE for Early-Career Women Faculty

Advancement of Minority Investigators in Academic Medicine

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Tips for a Successful Academic Career: Gbenga's Rules

- Find passion in what you do
- Be open-minded and flexible in your scientific journeys
- Practice resilience – it is a crucial ingredient for managing failures
- Forge collaborations outside your shop, lab or group
- Know the rules of the game – getting tenured or being acclaimed in your work
- Understand the business of research

Tips for a Successful Academic Career: Gbenga's Rules

- Invest in your career or self through self-learning
- Refrain from ‘thrashing’ your mentors because it is a small world out there
- Strive to mentor others despite the demand on your time; it pays off in later years
- Be brave: don't be afraid to explore other opportunities
- Use your peers wisely

A Brief Account of My Career

- Completed medical education in Ukraine: Donetsk State Medical Institute in Donetsk
- Returned home to Nigeria for internship and served one year in the national service corps
- Emigrated to the United States in 1991
- Worked as a research assistant at Harlem Hospital Center for 2 years before residency

Residency in Social Medicine: Montefiore / Albert Einstein (Bronx, NY)

- Upon completion was offered a Chief Resident position prior to faculty appointment
- Was advised by my faculty advisor to do an MPH if I want to survive in academia
- Turned down Chief position and spent one year in Sickle Cell research at an NIH-funded center
- Enrolled in MPH program at Columbia University School of Public Health

Fellowship in Health Services Research and Clinical Epidemiology @ Cornell Weill Medical School

- Completed 2 years but was asked to take a 3rd year because of visa status
- Each fellow is assigned a primary and secondary mentor to guide their projects
- Essentially spent my third year of fellowship writing grants: submitted a K award, an R01, a diversity supplement and a foundation grant
- **Useful tips:** *open-mindedness and forging collaboration outside one's shop*

Be open-minded and flexible in your scientific journeys

- My research question was to explore impact of patients' beliefs on medication adherence
- Mentorship committee advised against this, but to instead focus on the concept of self-efficacy
- Eventually developed the only instrument to evaluate medication adherence self-efficacy
- This instrument formed the basis of my first R01 which was funded in Year 3 of my fellowship

Forge collaboration outside your shop

- I met and later became the protégé of one of the influential leaders in hypertension research – Tom Pickering
- I had my first grant-writing experience by participating on an NIH proposal with Tom's group – the only behavioral cardiovascular research group at Cornell
- I was introduced to the Society of Behavioral Medicine and prominent leaders in the field of health psychology and behavioral medicine research

First Job as Junior Faculty (2001-2003)

- I received my first R01 in year 3 of my fellowship and was retained on faculty as Assistant Professor of Medicine
 - Hired my first research assistant on the R01
- Received my second grant as PI of a sub-project on a Center Grant
- Was invited as an expert to NIH workshops on medication adherence
- Joined NIH behavioral medicine study section

- **Tips: Forging collaborations**

Second Job as Junior Faculty: Columbia University (2003-2008)

- Recruited to join Tom Pickering's group as Assistant Professor of Medicine (tenure track) at the Center for Behavioral Cardiovascular Health
- Spent 5 years on faculty; wrote numerous grants in order to maintain my funding (95% of salary)
- Received my second R01 in 2005
- Continued collaboration with Cornell on the Center grant
- Tips: Managing transition, understanding the business of research; knowing the rules of the game, mentoring others and practicing resilience

Lessons on transitioning

- Transitions are typically stressful for both parties – mentors may view departure as loss of investment, sense of ungratefulness, or in some cases betrayal
- You've got to stay positive but remain focused on your decision
- Master your mood: remember this is about your career and NOT ABOUT your emotions
- Do not engage in bad-mouthing your mentors, after all is said and done, your mentor deserves some credit for believing in you and having invested time in your growth
- Remember, the scientific community is really small!!!

Know the rules of the game

- I was ignorant of the tenure rules while at Cornell and did not know the business of research until I got to Columbia
- My Chief requested two documents:
 - A 5-year business plan of how I plan to sustain my funding
 - Self-rating of my chances for tenure with regards to my pubs, grants, teaching and national recognition
- I drafted an individual development plan and sought mentorship to address the gaps in my areas of weakness
- I established an informal group of mentors outside Columbia to guide me on this journey

The Individual Development Plan (IDP)

- Self evaluate career success skills and interests
- Clinical
- Creative/scholarly
- Teaching/mentoring
- Leadership/management Interpersonal
- Prioritize your interests and reflect on your values
- Set short and long term goals
- Measure progress and recalibrate



Understanding the Business of Research

- I inquired about the minimum funding criteria I needed to maintain at Columbia
- I continued to collaborate with colleagues lending my expertise to be on their grants for some of my effort
- I served as faculty on fellowship training programs as a mentor to enable me recruit fellows and I served on thesis dissertation committees for PhD students to enable me get free research assistance
- I registered for, and attended numerous career development programs at national meetings
- I attended every workshop on NIH funding and opportunities

Resilience is a **NECESSARY** ingredient for managing failures

- The requirement to support 95% of my salary led to numerous NIH proposals with only ~15% success (this was a time when NIH funding was flat)
- I also learnt to deal with negative messages: some mentors deliver their messages in blunt and often negative terms that you may find offensive
- There is usually some truth in the messages and I learnt to turn such messages into strengths by actively deliberating upon the advise given
- Resilience is also crucial when dealing with manuscript rejection and other scholarly activities

Third Faculty Job: Transition to NYU:

- I joined NYULH in 2008 to launch the *Center for Healthful Behavior Change* as Associate Professor of Medicine (tenure track)
- Needed to establish a robust research group and self-sustaining outfit
- Mentor the next generation of junior faculty in health services research and translational behavioral medicine research
- Tips: Being brave; mentoring others; forging collaboration; and resilience

Be Brave

- Decision to work with Tom's group
- Move to Columbia
- Move to NYU is the boldest in my career:
 - the Division of General Internal Medicine was relatively new with little NIH funding
 - I was doing well on the tenure track at Columbia, had solid IDP, set up writing group, was in the midst of my second R01 and had just received a good score on my 3rd R01
 - Was just selected to serve on the NIH Committee that sets Hypertension Treatment Guidelines
 - Permanent member of the BMIO NIH Study Section (Behavioral Medicine, Intervention and Outcomes)

Seek to Mentor Others

- The first set of core CHBC faculty were my former trainees and fellows
- I applied for a Mid-level Career Development Grant (K-24), which received an excellent score largely based on the number of trainees both junior faculty, post-docs, fellows, residents and graduate students I have been fortunate to mentor over the years
- The same criteria were essential for future training grants in my Center (R25s, T32, and a D43 Fogarty training grant to develop investigators in Ghana)

Full Circle.....12 years later

- Built one of the large research groups in my department
- Lead a large Division in my department
- Launched a new Section in Global Health recently
- Creating an Institute for Excellence in Health Equity across NYU Langone Health
- Served as Founding Vice Dean of the NYU College of Global Public Health
- Up until recently served as Associate VC for Academic Networking, NYU Global Programs

Final thoughts and lessons learnt

- Do not take things personal
- Focus on your **integrity and values** that brought you thus far
 - your success is NOT an accident
- Be **TRANSPARENT** in all your activities
- Keep your mentoring team apprised of your research activities
- Be **collegial** with your colleagues because you never know when you will need them

Important Mentors in My Career

- **Brenda Aiken, MD**
 - Steered me towards research and its importance for a successful academic career
- **William Gerin, PhD**
 - Taught me the art of grant writing
- **Thomas Pickering, MD (Deceased)**
 - Taught me selflessness and importance of investing in mentoring trainees and junior faculty
- **Mary Charlson, MD**
 - Taught me the power of finding passion in what one does and the foundations of research methodology
- **John Allegrante, PhD**
 - Taught me the art of work-life balance; broad-mindedness and taking risks



Whatever you do dedicate time for
fun and **remember your family**



Provided me unfettered support and very much believe in me!

The only group among my peers, who provides positive feedback to me

THANK YOU!