

Shaping a Career as a Clinician Educator

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The Challenge

“OMG I’ve just completed residency and now I’m a clinical teacher.”

“I think I want to become a clinician educator but I’m not sure how.”

“I don’t understand my role or how I will know that I am successful as a clinician educator.”

Physicians arrive at their jobs through a clearly delineated pathway that extends from medical school through specialty certification and employment. In contrast, clinician educators (CEs) must discover and then navigate an array of potential pathways that are dynamic, evolving, and individualized. CEs may complete graduate degrees, medical education fellowships, or faculty development programs. They may also acquire skills through meetings and workshops. The common thread is that CEs, regardless of their career pathways, learn to be educators on the job. How does one engage in this process?

What Is Known

Learning through experience involves an interplay between the individual and the organization or workplace.¹ For CEs, this includes clinical and sponsoring institutions, professional societies, and medical education organizations. Workplaces provide opportunities, resources, and guidance for growth and advancement to support employees’ specific institutional interests and priorities, which are collectively known as “workplace affordances.”¹ CEs should take advantage of workplace affordances and recognize how their own values and goals align with workplace priorities. CE agency is essential when seeking out workplace affordances (and those from professional societies) such as resources, guidance, and opportunities to foster both short- and long-term career paths. CEs re-cycle through this process with each new role and at every career stage as new or expert-level CE competencies are needed.²



RIP OUT ACTION ITEMS

1. Continuously align your personal engagement (mission, roles, colleagues) with the affordances (activities, resources, funding, and interactions) available in your sponsoring institution.
2. Continuously grow competence as a clinician educator (CE) through communities of practice, mentors, and professional development resources.
3. Document activities as a CE in a manner consistent with your sponsoring institution’s guidelines.
4. Provide mentorship, sponsorship, and advice to the next generation of CEs.

How You Can Start TODAY

1. **Start with yourself: write a mission statement.** Most successful CEs are driven by personal values with a clear sense of individual mission and purpose. Consider your personal beliefs and life history as you refine your mission and purpose, which may evolve over time, as these represent the lenses through which you should assess opportunities. Some CEs prefer to identify concrete short-, medium-, and long-term goals, while others successfully grow through exploring new opportunities as they emerge.
2. **Understand your workplace goals and criteria for advancement.** Your sponsoring institution aligns resources and opportunities with its mission and goals to serve its priorities. Understand these affordances by seeking guidance from knowledgeable individuals (eg, role models, mentors, sponsors, senior colleagues) to determine what matches with your personal mission and purpose. Aligning personal with workplace priorities and seeking opportunities to engage are keys to success, independent of career phase.¹ Academic promotion criteria and advancement frameworks vary by organization, but there are generally accepted CE promotion standards,³ which include the type(s), quantity, and quality of scholarly work required. Understanding promotion standards allows CEs to match personal goals with institutional expectations.⁴
3. **Volunteer, “stretch,” develop competence, and document productivity.** Whether teaching at the bedside, volunteering to lead a journal club, joining a workgroup, chairing a clinical competency committee, or accepting a new role as program director or medical education leader, all require you to “stretch” and develop competence.² CEs can find professional development through their own sponsoring institutions and professional organizations. Obtaining certification in a specific domain (eg, educational research, learning theory, assessment) or a graduate degree provides formal CE training; calculate the value of these

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programs relative to time, effort, and cost. Most importantly, document your activities, their impact, and their outcomes in a format consistent with your sponsoring institution's guidelines. Consider an educator's portfolio and update your documentation at least twice yearly.⁵

4. Identify colleagues and find communities of practice. Having like-minded colleagues with complementary educational interests, expertise, and roles at your sponsoring institution and nationally is vital for career success. Build relationships with local and national experts in your field by connecting on social media, joining regional or national interest groups, or volunteering to serve on society workgroups, all of which will expand your communities of practice. Such relationships offer peer support, mentorship, sponsorship, resources, and best practices. Mentorship from colleagues at different career stages and in different specialties provides diverse perspectives.

5. Discover and access organizational resources. Sponsoring institutions often offer resources, such as funding, memberships in organizations, and sponsorship (eg, participation in the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine program). Contact your Graduate Medical Education, Academic Affairs, and Faculty Affairs offices and talk to colleagues to identify resources that align your interests with these workplace affordances.

What You Can Do LONG TERM

1. Review and revise your personal engagement with workplace affordances. Your CE career path will take twists and turns. To optimize fit with your sponsoring institution's workplace affordances, continuously align your personal mission and engagements as they change with your institution's opportunities and priorities. Talk to your colleagues internally and externally to explore alternatives if you find these misaligned.

2. Embrace discomfort in transitions and be adaptable. As ski instructors say, if you're not falling, then you're missing opportunities to learn. Recognize that new roles and transitions can be uncomfortable. Flexibility in adapting to new circumstances is a skill. Appreciate the transitions already navigated (eg, resident to attending, attending to mentor, faculty to senior leader) and build on adaptive skills previously developed. Whether seeking a new leadership role, honing one's teaching or administrative craft, or carving a new research or clinical niche, the sands under a CE's feet are constantly shifting. Expand and leverage your communities of practices to match evolving needs and interests.

3. Expend time and energy in priority areas. The Pareto Principle holds that 80% of outcomes come from 20% of one's effort. When applied to career development, a small percentage of a faculty member's activities contribute disproportionately to career success and advancement. Identify and prioritize which efforts comprise that 20%. Carefully balance the diversity of what you could do with anticipated impact and prospect of skill building. Say no to

new projects or roles if they do not clearly align with values and passions.

4. Pay it forward. As your career progresses, give back to others through mentorship and guidance to help lift the next generation of CEs. Many sponsoring institutions and professional societies have mentorship programs to connect you with trainees and junior faculty. Participate in local and national advocacy efforts to recognize and support CEs.

5. Stay clinically active and inspired. As years pass and career trajectories evolve, administrative responsibilities for CEs often rise, and time spent seeing patients may decrease. Carving out patient care time supports maintenance of clinical skills and relevance to trainees. Whether considering new educational projects, leadership opportunities, or a transition to former roles, focus on work that inspires and allows for growth and vitality.

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