Thirst for Mentorship in Global Health Research
CCGHR Summer Institute (SI) – Facilitators in Training (FIT)

Donald C. Cole and Victor Neufeld

As Canadian global health funders started investing in research in the first part of the 2000-2010 decade, both young researchers and those new to global health research began actively seeking guidance from colleagues with greater experience. The Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research (CCGHR) started with Summer Institutes (SIs) for dyads of new global health researchers, initially at Dalhousie University in Canada, but then moved to institutes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) -- Tanzania, Mexico, India, back to Canada for an SI focused on Indigenous health, then to francophone Africa, and Latin America (http://www.ccghr.ca/Default.aspx?pageId=1059610). Through both university contacts and participants at these SIs, CCGHR recognized an un-slaked thirst for mentorship.

CCGHR sponsored a Mentorship Workshop (with CIHR funding) in April 2006 involving colleagues from across Canada (http://www.ccghr.ca/Resources/Documents/Resources/Mentoring_Workshop_Report_Banff.pdf). Participants discussed “minefields” for new global health researchers struggling with the challenges of establishing partnerships with LMIC research colleagues and relevant knowledge users, obtaining research funding, dealing with ethical review transnationally, and achieving not only permission for, but recognition of, their global work in Canadian contexts. Senior colleagues spoke of the need for a “critical mass” of mentors at each institution-university. Mentors indicated a desire to improve skills and supports for “effective mentoring”. Together they discussed options for a global health research mentoring program.

CCGHR formed a Subgroup on Mentorship (of the Capacity Building Task Group), which drew on diverse mentorship literatures and experience as mentors and mentees in global health research to produce a set of Mentoring Modules (http://www.ccghr.ca/Default.aspx?pageId=1229011). A great resource but more people were still needed to engage in mentorship new global health researchers!

For CCGHR Summer Institutes, Facilitators in Training are the Right Fit!

As the Summer Institute program evolved, CCGHR realized that this provided a special opportunity for leadership development within the Coalition itself and so turned to eager
SI alumni who wanted to keep involved and learn mentoring skills. We developed a “Facilitator-in-Training” (FITs) program for the 2007 SI, to build leadership in global health research among both Canadian researchers and their partners working in LMIC settings. Each year from 2007 to 2010, two alumni become FITs for new participants in a subsequent SI, with active mentoring by a more senior facilitator and the SI facilitator team. A senior Canadian facilitator recalled “how intentional we were about the objectives that the FITs had for themselves. …What’s your explicit learning objective for this week for yourself? Then how can any of us ... help you with that?”

Henceforth, SIs included two levels of mentoring: 1) participants received feedback on the content of their project in the field of health from a designated FIT and/or more senior facilitator and 2) FITs receive feedback on their mentorship of participants. FITs developed skills in assisting new global health researchers in linking with partners, designing their studies, framing ethical issues, and thinking through knowledge-to-action plans. Senior facilitators modeled teaching and coaching skills and the facilitator team provided feedback to all during debriefing sessions interspersed through the face-to-face SI session, brainstorming ways of working through problems. As a Canadian FIT said “I think the main thing was that we were able to talk to the other facilitators. ... We had daily feedback with all the other facilitators so that we could bring up any issues we had with any of our dyads, so that was actually really good.” An LMIC FIT agreed: “[Facilitator] was a very good mentor for me, with whom I felt confident bringing some of the questions that were on my mind about management, about communication, etc. He was able to bring some new perspectives, and give some new links and literature where I could explore more information.... I understood the importance of asking the questions, and I also learned to pose the questions. So it made me change my attitude to become more positive, and also to improve my skills in designing the questions so that people can really think.”

Challenges arose in a number of areas. A LMIC FIT described how he had to take vacation time to participate and “it really was a conflict when I returned to work because they found out that I had gone to this event and instead of being supportive or to recognize the work, it became a problem for me. [My employer] didn’t see the need for participating in these types of gatherings.” The FIT mentioned that perhaps receiving academic credit, or similar recognition, could assist potential FITs from LMICs in convincing employers of the value of participating in an SI.

Other FITs described a sense of learning through the challenges posed by being “new” to mentoring. Thus, a couple of Canadian FITs described a sense of insecurity or nervousness around their role in mentoring their dyads, however both indicated they worked through the challenges and gained new insights. The first FIT described how having knowledge of the context in which her dyad worked, knowing the country and the populations involved, helped to counterbalance insecurities she had about mentoring. The second FIT described how she felt challenged in her role as a mentor due to the different levels of experience, disciplinary and cultural backgrounds of the dyad assigned to her. Furthermore, linguistic barriers and the fact the dyad partners didn’t know each other previously, made mentoring a challenge for her. In her interview, she mentioned having to speak to the directors of the SI and request support from a more senior facilitator. This individual helped co-facilitate
and assisted technically with translation. From this experience, the FIT reported learning that mentoring involves adaptability and the ability to detect problems. “Overall, it was a very good experience because I learned a lot, but it was difficult for me”. The FIT indicated that having another colleague at the SI who was also a FIT was useful, as they could support one another. A LMIC FIT discussed learning to be a more patient listener, from observing a senior facilitator. A Canadian FIT described an ideal approach “Mentor formation should keep the same rules and approach as [for] the alumni, that is: flexibility, mutual aid, adaptation to [the] specific situation.

Some facilitators suggested that more explicit training on facilitating methods would be useful in future SIs. A Latin American based facilitator explained that “It would have been a good idea to have more in-depth training in the area of methodologies, and information about the development of the SI. [...] Probably some of the things I’m going to say have already been changed because we provided feedback at the SI. But, training and information before the sessions at the SI, these would be helpful.” A Canadian-based facilitator echoed sentiments of making mentorship training available to experienced and non-experienced facilitators. In addition, he suggested that “one of the things we need to put together, is a bit of a manual, or a guide to an institute. Because I think in both cases [when I participated] I realized how much was implicit, and how we probably need to make it more explicit in terms of our understanding of the nature of the education or the educational formats.” So CCGHR is pulling together a guide to conducting Institutes.

**Becoming Part of the CCGHR Community**

Informally, senior facilitators mentored FITs on their careers, both during and after the face-to-face SI session. They have provided guidance in finding funding and sponsored FITs as lead investigators (with them as co-investigators) on grants. Most FITs have kept in contact with CCGHR colleagues, including facilitators, as their careers advanced. At a minimum, they have attended the annual Canadian conferences on global health, and have promoted membership in the organization. Others have been active in CCGHR at their home institution or in a CCGHR-linked program promoting health research to action in their country. Still others have become active in capacity strengthening programs with CCGHR, with their organization and evaluation. Two LMIC FITs have joined the CCGHR Board.

After a break to evaluate its efforts, CCGHR is again taking up the challenge to help support universities and global health researchers’ home institutions to keep working at building “a culture of mentorship” in global health research. Going forward, CCGHR will seize opportunities as they arise to work with Canadian university partners. For example, CCGHR is currently working with Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario to co-plan the capstone week for the Department of Global Development Studies’ Certificate in International Development program. CCGHR also aims to work with institutions in its LMIC partner countries to establish long-term commitment to institutional research capacity strengthening.