“Working as a team provides its own reward, especially in these times of limited funding. Sponsoring the academic success of others is not something to be feared.”

PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER BARNER-KOWOLLIK
ACTIVELY SPONSORING YOUNG RESEARCHERS: The long game to independent research is a team play

Growing a strong and diverse university research capability is a long game that can play out over decades. Strategic mentoring, active sponsorship and teamwork can cut a path for early career researchers and leads to a prosperous research community. Actively sharing expertise and sponsoring the next generation of researchers is critical to increasing the rate of academic success. It also contributes to a collaborative school of thought that seeks, finds and benefits from new opportunities.

Game strategy
Active sponsorship is a mentoring strategy that does not leave success to chance.

Senior academics must share knowledge and foster trust: they teach young postdoctoral researchers who wish to pursue an academic career how to run a successful research group, lead a class and take on the responsibilities of their role.

Academia is a hard road and not for everybody; it can mean years of uncertainty and movement between institutions and often countries. The payoff is the academic freedom to follow your passion in a research direction which often leads to new, ground-breaking technologies that overcome fundamental challenges in our society.

Using active sponsorship, three of my postdoctoral fellows have obtained professorial positions through my laboratory at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) in Germany.

At QUT, two of my postdoctoral fellows have successfully obtained Australian Research Council (ARC) funded fellowships and begun their journey towards successful independence with one reaching independence through both KIT and QUT.

Together, we came up with a game plan for their success.

Based on my own experience in an actively sponsored environment at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and with almost two decades of experience in mentoring the next generation of research leaders, I will outline the key elements of active sponsorship.
Team selection
Choosing team players who are willing to put in the hard yards is the most important component of any active sponsorship relationship.

When choosing mentees, I am transparent about the failure rate of seeking a leadership position in academia and the work ethic required to become successful. Sponsoring someone’s career progression means I also need to work hard to ensure that my mentees receive the support specifically tailored to their needs.

Early career researcher success is not achieved by meeting a mentee every 6 months; a mentor must be available to support their protégé on a weekly basis.

Sponsorship also ensures no one is left behind, especially when candidates reach the point in their lives when they want to start a family.

To achieve long-term success, you must consistently track the needs of your sponsored researchers and continually look after their welfare.

Look for openings and pass the ball
Active sponsorship means strategically positioning your postdoctoral fellows to advance in their career by giving them opportunities to demonstrate and develop their academic independence.

Supporting your mentee to obtain a government-funded fellowship is critical to their ability to pursue their own research and publishing avenues. Your support means they can do this while remaining embedded in the larger research activities of a senior academic’s research group.

It’s all about the team effort and enabling other people’s success. Key elements of active sponsorship that you can follow include:

- Work with your mentee to clearly define joint and independent areas of research. Embrace the mentee’s skill set to open a new research field for the group, creating a new focus area and making the mentee’s work visible and independent.
- Make sure the mentee is involved in your ongoing projects and PhD supervision to provide opportunities to publish widely in the early phases of their road to independence.
- Provide opportunities for your mentee to hold corresponding author positions on publications early on, but be sure to teach them what it means to take on that responsibility in terms of student supervision load and research project leadership. Let your mentee submit the manuscript to build a relationship with editors in chief and editorial boards.
- On selected joint work, step back from authorships. Never co-author a primary data paper in your mentee’s research space, regardless of how much you have advised them.
- Recommend your mentee for invited speaking slots at conferences. When and where suitable, transfer your invitation to your mentee, explaining to the conference chair that you would be proud if they represented the research group.
- Foster future opportunities in the industrial space by including your mentee in specific industry engagements. The mentee will learn from your negotiation strategies with industry partners and can grow a network outside the academic realm. Share all credit for that relationship equally with your mentee.
- Actively share your academic leadership experience. While an early career researcher is well equipped to lead projects on a scientific level, they still need to develop strategies to successfully lead a team of individual researchers. Joint supervision of PhD projects is an excellent opportunity for your mentee to actively learn from your leadership, especially if you make your thought process and decision-making rationale transparent.

Building a team culture
You become a leader when you are able to advance the careers of others.

Professors who have already been promoted to the top of their career are in a good position to drive the culture of active sponsorship and allow young researchers the opportunity to pay it forward one day.

It is difficult to formalise active sponsorship because it is a cultural practice, and researchers need to grow up with it.

Reward and recognition for mentoring someone into a fellowship position has to be embedded into the fabric of our university’s culture.

However, a culture of active sponsorship intrinsically leads to very tangible wins, as the benefits of engagement, support and shared success come back to you and your institution in time.
Success breeds success

Working as a team provides its own reward, especially in these times of limited funding. Sponsoring the academic success of others is not something to be feared. Postdoctoral researchers who can grow their networks and influence also become a natural fit for joint grant proposals and international collaboration when they achieve their own professorships. Active sponsorship can also create prestigious opportunities for senior researchers.

Professors who actively sponsor are more likely to achieve the highest level of fellowships, centre directorships and other senior positions. To ensure the continued growth of our research communities, every professor should have a strong network of peers who come from this active sponsorship school of thought. Your mentee’s success is everyone’s success.

PAYING IT FORWARD:
Active sponsorship in action

PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER BARNER-KOWOLLIK
Professor Christopher Barner-Kowollik has used the active sponsorship model to mentor postdoctoral researchers to professorship through his soft matter materials laboratories at KIT and QUT.
Research groups with a successful active sponsorship model in place foster young researchers into leadership positions and grow a mutually supportive research community.

MENTEES

PROFESSOR TANJA JUNKERS
Polymer Synthesis, Flow Chemistry, Machine Learning and Polymerisation Kinetics
Monash University

PROFESSOR EVA BLASCO
Functional Polymeric Materials
Heidelberg University

DR HENDRIK FRISCH
Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow
Synthetic Polymer-Peptide Hybrid Materials
QUT

PROFESSOR GUILLAUME DELAITTRE
Organic Functional Molecule, Functional Polymer Synthesis and Nanomaterials
University of Wuppertal

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JAMES BLINCO
Macromolecular and Materials Chemistry, Organic Chemistry
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DR BRYAN TUTEN
Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow
Advanced Macromolecular Multicomponent and Chalcogen Materials
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