Developing Tomorrow’s Tobacco Scientists Today: The SRNT Trainee Network

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SRNT Trainee Network Advisory Board

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ABSTRACT

The Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) Trainee Network was formed to facilitate the development of the emerging generation of tobacco scientists. The advisory board of the Trainee Network conducted an online survey to collect data on trainees’ areas of tobacco-related interest, demographics, and interest in potential events, as well as strategies with which SRNT could best address training-related needs. Survey respondents (N = 130) were, on average, 34.7 years of age and mostly female (74%). Half were early-stage investigators (i.e., faculty), and 41% were in psychology programs. Most respondents reported that they spent at least half of their time in research activities (87%) and hoped to work in an academic setting (85%).

The most frequently endorsed type of help requested was for SRNT to provide networking opportunities, and grant-writing was the most frequently endorsed webinar topic of interest. The Trainee Network has launched a listserv that includes 85 trainees and 16 prominent senior investigators and will create webinars and host mixer events at SRNT meetings. These initiatives aim to enhance the professional development of SRNT trainees and contribute to the fulfillment of SRNT’s mission.

Key words: training, grant-writing, networking, tobacco, nicotine

INTRODUCTION

The primary mission of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) Trainee Network is to facilitate the professional development of the emerging generation of tobacco scientists. This network was formed as a result of a breakout discussion (“Training Tobacco Scientists: What Do Students and Trainees Need and Want?”) held during the 18th annual meeting of SRNT in March 2012. Co-chaired by Bryan Heckman (graduate student representative), Dr. Jessica Cook, and Dr. John Hughes, the network’s advisory board is composed of nine trainees who are at various stages of their careers, including graduate students, postdoctoral trainees, and early-stage investigators as defined by the National Institutes of Health (NIH; i.e., individuals within 10 years of terminal research degree or medical residency who have not yet held an R01 grant as a principal investigator). The SRNT strategic plan for 2013–2017 emphasizes that SRNT will meet the professional and educational needs of its members and will address the distinct needs of early-career researchers and aspiring members. Thus, the mission of SRNT is consistent that of the Trainee Network.

Since the inception of the Trainee Network, the advisory board has sought consultation from student leaders of other prominent organizations (e.g., the American Psychological Association), has held monthly teleconferences, and has established the following goals for the inaugural year of the Trainee Network: (1) describe SRNT trainees’ demographics, tobacco-related research interests, and training-related needs; (2) create a webinar series that addresses training-related needs; (3) host a conference event to promote networking among trainees, as well as between trainees and senior investigators; and (4) launch a trainee listserv to facilitate communication among trainees and offer another venue for dissemination of training-related information. Progress to date toward each goal is described below.

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Goal 1: Identify Trainees’ Demographics, Tobacco-Related Interests, and Training Needs

In July 2012, an invitation was sent via the SRNT listserv to all trainees to complete a 40-item online survey. Percentages reported herein are based upon the total number of respondents who completed each item.

A total of 130 trainees completed the survey: 26.7% were graduate students, 20% were postdoctoral fellows, and 50% were early-career investigators. SRNT did not collect sufficient information to determine the percentage of all trainees who completed the survey, but these 130 represent 12% of SRNT’s total membership. The average age of survey respondents was 34.7 years (SD = 7.8), and most were female (74%). The most common professional field was psychology (41%), followed by public health (27%) and medicine (13%). Most respondents reported that they spent at least 50% of their time in research activities (87%) (i.e., as opposed to teaching or clinical or service work) and hoped to work in an academic setting someday (85%). The majority of respondents currently had a mentor (83%) and rated the quality of their current mentoring as “excellent” or “good” (73%). Despite the overall satisfaction with current mentoring, 71% reported that they would benefit from having a mentor outside their current institution.

Trainees’ most frequent request for further help was for SRNT to better facilitate networking opportunities with peers or potential mentors (31%). The second most frequent response was for SRNT to provide resources specific to funding (21%), such as scholarships, travel compensation, and NIH and non-NIH research funding. Less frequently endorsed responses included resources related to career development and/or guidance (14%), content-specific information (e.g., assistance with manuscript preparation) (12%), online resources (e.g., webinars, listservs) (10%), and trainee events at the annual conference (10%).

Goal 2: Create Webinar Series to Address Training Needs

The online survey also assessed trainees’ interest in 15 potential webinar topics. The highest-rated topic was grant-writing, the grant review process, and grant receipt, with 68% indicating that they would definitely watch such a webinar. Other topics were manuscript writing and the review process (47%), career choices in different settings (39%), staying abreast of the current literature (39%), work-family issues (38%), what to get out of conferences (32%), presentation tips (31%), choosing a research area (30%), postdoctoral selection and interviewing (29%), understanding the NIH organization (24%), what to expect in a mentor and types of mentors (23%), development of graphs and tables (22%), ethical issues (17%), clinical internship selection (13%), and media relations (12%). Topics volunteered in an open-ended item included career development, smoking assessment (e.g., biochemical, psychophysiological, topography), efficacy of current cessation methods, and how to conduct cessation research. Given the strong interest in grant training and the high relevance of honing this skill set among emerging scientists, we plan to launch the SRNT Trainee Webinar series with a grant-writing webinar. This will take place on April 17, 2013, at 1 p.m. EST. The grant-writing webinar will be followed by webinars covering other topics that were rated highly by survey respondents.

Goal 3: Host a Conference Event

An initial idea assessed on the basis of the survey was to hold a preconference workshop covering a topic of interest, such as grant-writing. However, 51% of respondents reported a low likelihood of attending a preconference workshop on grant-writing. This finding contrasts with the finding that the most interesting webinar topic was grant-writing. One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is cost: Only 31% of respondents reported that they could afford the $150 cost typical of an SRNT preconference workshop. Other general topics of interest for a potential preconference workshops included (1) career development (e.g., interviewing, internship and job selection, the tenure process), (2) grant-related (e.g., predoctoral fellowships, non-NIH funding sources), (3) research methodology (e.g., study design, novel research methods), (4) intervention-focused (e.g., availability and efficacy of smoking cessation interventions), or (5) content-specific (e.g., global trends in tobacco use).

Trainees also expressed interest in attending a conference social mixer at which they could network with one another as well as with senior investigators. The Trainee Network has therefore planned such an event for the 19th annual SRNT meeting in Boston on Friday, March 15, 2013, from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Westin Boston Waterfront Hotel (Hancock Room). All trainees are invited to attend, as are representatives of tobacco-related training programs and senior investigators who have an interest in training and/or mentoring. Representatives from the following institutions and agencies will be present: Alpert Medical School, Brown University; The Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, Hopkins Institute for Global Tobacco Control; the National Institute on Drug Abuse; the University of Hawaii Cancer Center; the University of Minnesota Medical School; the University of Nebraska–Lincoln; the University of Pittsburgh; the University of South Florida Moffitt Cancer Center; the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine; the University of Sydney, Australia; the Veterans Affairs Connecticut Healthcare System; the Virginia Commonwealth University; the Yale University School of Medicine; and the Yale Cancer Center.

Goal 4: Launch a Trainee Listserv

The aim of the trainee listserv is to promote an open and comfortable dialogue between emerging scientists and senior investigators. The listserv opened on August 27, 2012, and currently has 85 trainees and 16 senior members. Trainees are encouraged to solicit information and advice regarding topics relevant to career development. If you are interested in joining this listserv, please e-mail lists@srent.org, with Trainee Network in the subject line.

CONCLUSIONS

The SRNT Trainee Network Advisory Board has achieved two of its four inaugural year goals, i.e., conduct a survey of trainees and launch a listserv for trainees, and has made significant progress toward its other two goals, i.e., create a webinar series and host a conference event. As a result of current initiatives,
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the Trainee Network Advisory Board has developed a better understanding of SRNT members who are early in their careers, as well as ways in which SRNT can enhance their educational and professional development. Organizational emphasis on trainee development is imperative for SRNT to achieve its mission and act consistently with its stated priority of addressing the needs of trainees and early-career members. Fostering the next generation of tobacco scientists is essential for continued progress in preventing and treating tobacco dependence.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

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