In late 2015, the Outreach subcommittee began a review of the Society's mentoring program. Circa 2015, the Society's role in the mentoring program took the form of an assignment process: new mentees would be assigned a mentor from among a pool of volunteers by the coordinator of the program, and both mentor and mentee would be informed of the assignment. The mentorship itself was then entirely up to the mentors and mentees.

The viewpoint of the coordinator at the time was that this system worked very well in a few cases while being rather ineffectual for most others. Few of the pairings seemed to "stick". This viewpoint was based mainly on the coordinator's anecdotal observations, however, so the subcommittee conducted an online poll of all program participants in 2016 to obtain a more complete picture of the state of the program. The results are in the attached PDF.

The results showed higher satisfaction levels with the mentoring program than were expected based on the anecdotal evidence. Still, a large majority of mentees (64%) said that they "hardly ever" received advice from their mentors and a comparable majority of all of the participants (63%) said that either "minor" or "significant" changes to the program should be contemplated.

The subcommittee discussed these results and the mentoring program in general on several occasions during 2016 and 2017. The subcommittee recognized that the mentoring program had been running for some time and had served some Society members very well. At the same time, the committee came to two conclusions. First, given how busy program participants (and especially the mentors) are, the factor that most limits mentorship is a lack of time and energy on the part of the program participants (and especially the mentors). Second, successful young professionals generally have a network of mentors, not just one, that can advise them on different things and offer complementary viewpoints.

In parallel with this discussion, the subcommittee has been organizing events at Society-sponsored conferences, most recently at ISIT 2016, ITA 2017, and ISIT 2017. The subcommittee has found that it can be difficult to achieve consistently high production quality when an entirely new event must be developed for each conference. Thus the
subcommittee began working on a "template" of an event that can be repeated every year with different particulars, akin to the "Meet the Shannon Awardee" event organized by the Student subcommittee.

Eventually, these two threads, the mentoring program and the need for an event template, converged into the mentoring events sponsored by the Outreach Subcommittee at both ISIT 2016 and ISIT 2017. The format of these events has been reported to the BoG in the past. Briefly, the subcommittee recruits mentors to speak to different issues: time management, funding your research, the postdoc experience, etc., and stations them at different tables (or rooms) and any ISIT attendee is free to receive mentoring on a topic of their choice. One table at ISIT 2017 was devoted to "building your mentoring network." There Outreach Subcommittee members helped younger members of the Society identify senior members of the Society with whom they might consult.

This event format addresses several issues. Having the Outreach Subcommittee members create time and space for mentoring at ISIT lightens the load on the mentors and mentees. It increases the total amount of mentorship that occurs in the Society, and it allows mentees to receive advice from a varied group of mentors. And repeating this event at ISIT every year (with an revolving cast of mentors and topics) allows the subcommittee to hone it over time, ensuring a consistent level of production quality.

For these reasons, the Outreach Subcommittee is considering evolving the "assignment-based" mentoring program into one that is more event-focused, and in particular centered around mentoring events similar to those that occurred at ISIT 2016 and ISIT 2017. Since this represents a departure from past practice, the Outreach Subcommittee seeks feedback from the BoG on this proposal.

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