

How to choose a research project

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Most fellows are expected to complete a research project during their gastroenterology training. Unfortunately, many are not equipped with the knowledge necessary to choose one wisely. I have been in academics long enough to have seen many fellows err when picking a research project, which usually results in abandonment of the project and sometimes disillusionment with academics. So here are a few tips to help you avoid choosing the wrong project.

Most importantly, the project should be simple. Too often, fellows choose or are coaxed into participating in large, complex, multi-centered, or even multi-disciplinary projects. Such studies usually cannot be completed within the short span of GI training. Moreover, you are likely to be only peripherally involved and will not gain valuable experience of hands-on research. Ideally, you should be the primary person in charge of the project.

Stay away from writing book chapters or reviews. These may result in a publication but do little to advance a research career. Faculty members are known to dump a review on a fellow because they don't have time to write it themselves. I would recommend getting involved with reviews or chapters only if time allows in addition to your own specific clinical or basic research project.

Be sure to gain a firm understanding of what the project requires you to do. It is very difficult for a trainee with little experience in research to know exactly what is involved in a project prior to starting it. You should inquire as much as possible about what skills are needed to complete the study successfully. You may find that you need additional training to learn a bench technique or you may need to take a course in statistics or epidemiology. A good mentor can help you determine if the project is appropriate for you.

Lastly, an ideal project is one generated from your own interest or a specific question. This is especially important because all projects are subject to frustrating delays and unforeseen problems. The more you are genuinely interested in the research question, the more likely that you will be able to overcome the obstacles that are inevitable in any research experience. Again, a mentor can help you develop your question into a viable research project. Use these tips as a guide to choosing the best project for yourself so that you can make your GI fellowship as rewarding as possible.