How does one develop an academic career in the field of wilderness medicine?

As a faculty member at the University of California San Francisco Fresno (UCSF Fresno), my career has been guided by understanding academic success, identifying avenues of service to the field of wilderness medicine (WM), and focusing on activities that generate personal and professional satisfaction. I hope this article will be a helpful aid to those just starting and an interesting perspective to already established wilderness medicine colleagues. As a new faculty member, I attended a course on academics given by the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) Teaching Fellowship. The following invaluable lessons emerged:
Learn the rules of the game and follow the rules! Academic promotion is based on the ability to provide service to the field, research and teach.

Be open to finding and approaching potential mentors. Research in particular is an area that is difficult to become proficient in without strong mentorship.

You’ve got to learn to write to communicate to your global colleagues.

Respect your students, as they will become your teachers if you’ve done your job right.

Be a servant to others because collaboration is most successful if you don’t care who gets the credit.

Believe Woody Allen: "Half of life is showing up!"
Find your niche. You can either become an expert in a small area of wilderness medicine or you can be a generalist. Be deliberate in your efforts.

Give credit to others. Appreciation not only has been shown to improve personal performance but it also is the key to avoiding burnout.

First successful Search and Rescue mission as a sworn volunteer, with my teammates after the conclusion of the search.

Understanding academic medicine is the first step in having a successful wilderness medicine career, but identifying ways to provide service to the specialty will define your career course. Within wilderness medicine, service can range from departmental to national in scope. Administration and curricular development of medical student electives, resident rotations and wilderness medicine fellowship direction are great activities for academic faculty. Community leadership is vital in the United States national parks - many of which have volunteer medical directors - and in regional wilderness rescue organizations. Medical societies thrive with active participants in wilderness medicine sections to wilderness medicine course proposals for national audiences. The Wilderness Medical Society has committees for professionals wanting to contribute time and expertise. Journals related to wilderness medicine are always in need of qualified reviewers. Wilderness medicine Continuing Medical Education (CME) conferences can be an entry point to serve as faculty or provide administrative support. Co-chairing the UCSF’s High Sierra Wilderness Medicine Conference provided the necessary education.
A ‘Save the Date’ postcard for my first attempt at providing a Continuing Medical Education (CME) in the back-country. This was a backcountry experience by horseback with Clyde Pack Outfit into the John Muir Wilderness out of Wishon or Courtright Lakes east of Fresno-Clovis.

Teaching can be unparalleled in terms of career gratification, from the rigor of preparation to the chemistry that can occur in a committed and engaged audience. Completion of a WM/EMS fellowship at UCSF Fresno was my perfect instrument in developing both teaching skills and wilderness medicine experiences. I have been fortunate to be able to speak first hand on what I did (right and wrong) when lost in a blizzard, spending the unexpected night out, addressing dehydration without an open water source, treating altitude illness in colleagues and finishing a marathon right before a finish line explosion.

Requests for my speaking engagements spread mostly by word of mouth. The unexpected results have ranged from radio interviews, to a Public Broadcasting Station hour-long special on Wilderness Medicine, to becoming an invited faculty at national CME meetings. Being open to every opportunity to teach boosted my confidence and marketability to new audiences while building goodwill amongst those who hosted me as an educator.

Understanding academics, identifying avenues of service and a focus on teaching has served me well only four years into a satisfying career in wilderness medicine. This simple approach, along with tremendous support both within and outside of my institution, has resulted in becoming a national lecturer, an institutional CME chair, the Fresno Medical Reserve Corps Chair, a Search and Rescue sworn-volunteer, a Journal of Wilderness and Environmental Medicine reviewer, and an enthusiastic researcher under the guidance of more experienced and recognized colleagues. If only one piece of advice follows you throughout your endeavors, let it be that the best way to advance your career is to work hard to advance the career of someone else. I have been the recipient of such generosity early on in my career and am eager to return the favor until the day I hang up the hiking boots, safety pins, duct tape, and ten uses for a tampon in the wilderness.
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"Either write something worth reading or do things worth writing." -Ben Franklin

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