As students in the Canadian education system, we have come to realize the true power that a great mentor can possess. Indeed, most health professional students can easily identify the reason they chose to pursue their particular discipline. While interest, lifestyle and anticipated employment satisfaction are all important motivating factors, it seems that there is almost always a positive role model or mentor that is instrumental in facilitating this career selection. This observation is also supported by the academic literature, as various studies have noted the importance of having a mentor in business, law and medicine (Lunding et al., 1978; Wallace, 2001; Jackson et al., 2003). The experience of the National Health Sciences Students’ Association (NaHSSA) in Canada, in fact, has shown that this observation is equally (if not especially) applicable for explaining why students choose to become leaders in interprofessional education (IPE) and why research has shown that their organizations can be so successful (Hoffman et al., forthcoming).

Each instance of mentorship is perceived differently based on both the mentor and the person being mentored. In an academic setting, it is common to see mentorship as a quasi-contractual learning arrangement where a faculty member supervises a student in exchange for work on a project in his/her area. The clinical environment also features mentorship for health professional students whereby preceptors demonstrate clinical skills and role-model professional practices and ethical behaviour. While these types of mentorship are extremely valuable for students because they provide a structured mechanism for learning, such arrangements based on the concept of knowledge transfer and mimicry are not well-suited for student leadership in IPE, as the latter is something that faculty members and clinical preceptors have neither experience in doing nor could do even if they so desired. Rather, we have found that mentorship for student leaders requires engagement in students’ own values, guidance in keeping with the principles of self-directed learning, and the creation of awareness for opportunities that facilitate self-discovery and maturation.

The importance of these three constituent elements of mentorship must not be under emphasized as they are the most central aspects of the enabling environment that Hoffman et al. found to be essential for student leadership in IPE, which in turn has been shown to
enhance students’ willingness to collaborate and promote the sustainability of IPE efforts. An informal analysis by the NaHSSA leadership (both at national and local levels) found “mentorship” to be the number one explanatory factor for their success and a formal survey of student IPE leaders in Canada found that 41% of them lacked this enabling mechanism despite the completion of a major effort to recruit faculty advisors (Hoffman et al., forthcoming). Such a conclusion, however, is not surprising when one considers the diversity of contributions that mentors make every day to promote the growth and development of NaHSSA and its 20 local chapters (e.g., offering guidance, sharing past experiences, suggesting ideas, helping to secure funding, explaining institutional processes, linking student efforts to larger initiatives, creating opportunities, and facilitating awareness for relevant research evidence). This fact is also supported by the literature, where, for example, researchers found that 98% of participating medical students perceived a lack of mentorship to be a barrier to their success in academic medicine (Jackson et al., 2003). Accordingly, we have come to conceptualize the association’s success as a product of the partnership that exists between motivated students and dedicated mentors. The recent creation of the NaHSSA IPE Mentorship Award reflects this reality.

There are three individuals in particular who have served as role models for mentoring student leadership in IPE and have been instrumental in propelling NaHSSA forward from a small, single-site club in 2005 to the 20 chapter pan-Canadian national association it is today. All three of these mentors have been highly involved in engaging, guiding and creating awareness for opportunities among students, albeit in different ways. For example, Dr John Gilbert perpetually engages students with his raw enthusiasm for IPE and always offers his invaluable support most generously. Dr Ivy Oandasan, on the other hand, provides guidance at both the local and national level to help student leaders navigate the IPE literature and apply best practices to their innovative efforts. Dr Louise Nasmith has worked with NaHSSA leaders to identify opportunities that will both enhance the association’s work and ensure its long-term sustainability. To further highlight their ongoing contributions, Dr Gilbert and Dr Nasmith are active members of NaHSSA’s Board of Directors, and Dr Oandasan is the inaugural recipient of NaHSSA’s IPE Mentorship Award.

From these examples, it is clear that positive mentorship has allowed students in Canada to take a leading role in the IPE movement and that additional engagement, guidance and awareness for opportunities will facilitate further success in this area. While mentorship is often seen as something that is exclusively for academics or educators, our experience has shown us that some of the greatest mentors include civil servants, project managers, administrative staff and friends. It is our belief that anyone who comes in contact with a student has the ability to both provide mentorship and receive it.

We thus call upon readers to keep students in mind at all times, as mentorship can occur in the rarest of settings and the most surprising of forms. We also ask for your help in recognizing the invaluable work of the many wonderful mentors out there and finding creative ways in which institutions can support this most important contribution. Indeed, mentorship of the next generation is critical to the success of the IPE movement and is truly appreciated by those who are fortunate enough to receive it.

References
