

ASNR Virtual Mentorship Program Stories: Dr. David Cunningham

My name is David Cunningham, PhD, and I am a Staff Scientist in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the MetroHealth Rehabilitation Institute and an Assistant Professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. My research investigates the neuroplastic interactions of multimodal neuromodulatory techniques (e.g., non-invasive brain stimulation and functional electrical stimulation) within the damaged central nervous system and how these interactions can be optimized to enhance upper-limb motor recovery.



I have attended the American Society of Neurorehabilitation Annual Meetings since entering the field as a research technologist in 2012. These meetings, and the interactions with members, have played an important role in shaping my development as an investigator by supporting my growth through the open sharing of successes and setbacks and by offering guidance on navigating an academic career. It has been great to see how the Education Committee has expanded and formalized this support through programs like the [Virtual Mentoring Program](#). While mentoring will always develop organically at the Annual Meetings, the Virtual Mentoring Program expands these opportunities by connecting members throughout the year who might not otherwise cross paths. It also matches mentors and mentees with the goal of connecting individuals whose insights are relevant to the mentee's career stage.

At its core, the neurorehabilitation community is united by the goal of improving quality of life for those in need. But reaching that goal also means sharing advice on how to sustain an academic research career, a conversation that's valuable at every stage. For postdoctoral fellows, it may mean developing strategies to secure a faculty position, what it means to craft a five-year plan, and understanding how to identify departments where their expertise is both needed and supported. For new assistant professors, it involves learning how to build a team, giving both themselves and their members room to grow (and make mistakes), managing start-up funds wisely, and planning ahead for promotion milestones (i.e. balancing research, teaching, and service while building a national reputation). For all independent investigator career stages, it may be about staying creative with existing funding and strategically pursuing opportunities not only to sustain ongoing lines of research and launch innovative new studies, but also to ensure your team remains financially supported.

I have had the privilege of experiencing the Virtual Mentoring Program first as a mentee, and now as a mentor. As a mentee, I was fresh in my new faculty position having secured my first grant. I used the opportunity to learn from my mentor about his career path, interviewing and hiring strategies, and approaches to mentoring. Our discussions helped me think about how to best support lab members in carving out independent projects while ensuring we made progress on the newly funded study. Now, as a mentor, I have enjoyed learning about my mentee's

journey and offering advice drawn from my own experiences in similar situations. These conversations often take their own course, highlighting that sometimes *you don't know what you don't know*, and they can create opportunities to discover highly relevant resources and strategies that may have simply not been on one's radar.

I highly recommend participating in the program, as it offers the chance to connect with investigators at a variety of career stages, not to discuss the science, but the behind-the-scenes challenges they have faced, the problems you are currently facing, and those coming up that you will inevitably face in pursuit of an academic career.