Mentorship
A Key Component of the Emerging Psychedelic Career Field

Gina Giorgio

For most young adults, identifying a career path does not come easy. Typically, we are expected to choose a field of study around the age of 18 which is before we have substantial work experience and a good understanding of who we are. This premature career decision is often accompanied by a lot of trial and error (if someone is privileged enough to have the flexibility), becoming stuck in a career that is no longer suitable, or that was never of interest in the first place.

For those aspiring to a career in psychedelics, the path is even harder to chart, since the field is new and psychedelic legalization is still emerging. There is no clear road map for a viable psychedelic career and positions as psychedelic professionals can be limited. It likely comes as no surprise that pursuing a career in the psychedelic field as a young adult is extremely daunting for several reasons:

1. It is difficult to follow the steps of psychedelic professionals when there are few of them and many got their start through underground psychedelic work.
2. Psychedelic substances are overwhelmingly surrounded by stigmas and proclaiming support can be a reputational and professional risk.
3. Psychedelic careers, aside from therapy, are not widely available and it can take years to get your foot in the door.

Despite the difficulties that come with walking an uncharted path, I knew a career in psychedelics would be deeply rewarding, so I promptly applied to Students for Sensible Drug Policy’s (SSDP) Psychedelic Career Development Pipeline in the Fall of 2020. SSDP’s Psychedelic Pipeline program was created in 2019 and is the first formal pathway for young people interested in working in the psychedelic field. The program provides mentorship, scholarships, and training opportunities for those seeking to enter the psychedelic workforce—offering a unique opportunity for one-on-one career guidance with a mentor that has an established psychedelic career.

Upon my acceptance into the Pipeline, I did not have a clear sense of the career path I wanted to pursue, and I didn’t personally know anyone who was interested in psychedelic careers. Luckily, having a mentor is one of the main things that has helped me define my goals and the steps I can take to achieve them.
Since the Pipeline is now in its third year, it has not only had a profound impact on me, but it’s shaped many other participants’ lives and careers as well. As I reflect on how far I have come throughout Cohorts Two and Three, I’ve gathered some key takeaways that reflect how crucial a psychedelic career mentorship is.

One-on-One Support
I felt very isolated at the beginning of my pursuit of a psychedelic career. I did not have people close to me that were interested in psychedelics and I reside in a city with no psychedelic communities. It was very unnerving to be the only person to pursue a psychedelic job because my friends, family, professors, and coworkers did not understand my goals or know how to support me. Fortunately, joining the Pipeline and meeting regularly with my mentor, MAPS PBC’s Corporate Communications Project Manager, Anya Kramer, minimized my feelings of isolation, which granted me a renewed sense of confidence as I carve my own psychedelic career path.

Blake Durst, a mentee from Cohort Two, also commends his mentor, Ryan Beauregard, MAPS’ Zendo Project Programs Manager, for being a great source of support and knowledge. Ryan helped Blake integrate some of his challenging experiences following a week of ayahuasca ceremonies in Ecuador, and he provided encouragement and ideas for Blake’s dissertation. Blake recently received his counseling license and he will apply for MAPS’ MDMA-Assisted Therapy Training Program; he felt “so much more hope and confidence” since Ryan was willing to assist him in the process.

Providing Professional Opportunities
One of the main benefits I have experienced as a mentee is an influx of psychedelic career enrichment opportunities. Anya and I took advantage of the option to create a project together, which ultimately allowed me to volunteer with MAPS’ Communications team and assist with organizing their “Mentioned in the Media” document and writing information about psychedelic compounds for MAPS’ “Newsroom.” The final portion of my project (writing this article!) has given me further experience in psychedelic communications, along with the opportunity to strengthen my writing skills and publicize my work.

Another exciting professional opportunity is that I became the Pipeline’s first intern in November 2021. I consider this to be the most valuable aspect of my psychedelic career development thus far due to the scope of impact I can have on the field and on others. The benefits of this internship are that I get to meet and collaborate with numerous psychedelic professionals; I have gotten involved in psychedelic policy reform work; and I have started psychedelic journalism. These opportunities would not have been possible without the Pipeline and the connections I have made throughout it. Countless other mentees share this same sentiment.

A mentee from Cohort One, Chelsea Pederson, also had the opportunity to publish psychedelic work with the help of her mentor, MAPS’ Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Rick Doblin. Chelsea and Rick wrote a historical policy analysis together because they are both passionate about shifting psychedelic drug policies. Chelsea dreamed for years of writing something with Rick—to ultimately be matched with him in a mentorship was “a dream come true.” Currently, Chelsea is working with the Texas Drug Users Health Alliance to create a website (using the data she compiled with Rick and others) and to teach harm reductionists how to fight Texas drug policies and advocate for themselves. She is in the process of furthering her psychedelic policy work, and, this Spring, she is writing a document like the one she wrote with Rick to organize the fundraising to make her dream research come to fruition. My and Chelsea’s time in the Pipeline both reflect how the chance to collaborate with one person can open countless doors and fulfill lifelong goals.

Education About the Field and Navigating Uncertainty
When I joined the Pipeline, I felt lost about whether I should pursue a path in research, therapy, or communications. I was overwhelmed by the barrier of entry into some of these careers. Luckily, Anya educated me on a wide array of psychedelic companies and organizations, which in turn, expanded my knowledge of training opportunities, research, substances, and psychedelic literature. Subsequently, I was introduced to resources to effectively learn about psychedelic policy, the history of psychedelics, and reliable psychedelic news sources.

Arguably, one of the most valuable concepts I have learned is that not all psychedelic companies are created equally because people can have very different motivations when it comes to their involvement in the field. Supporting psychedelic non-profits, public benefit corporations, and for-profit companies that seek to expand equity of psychedelic-assisted therapy is a great way to ensure that psychedelic-assisted therapy becomes widely accessible. This information has shifted how I approach the field of psychedelic communications and what types of psychedelic policies and organizations I advocate for.

Vanessa Grifford, a mentee in all three Pipeline Cohorts, also stated that “this program has helped [her] understand that not everyone coming into the field of psychedelic medicine may have the same intentions or values and that [she] needs to be
cognizant of where [she] chooses to attend school and who [she] decides to work with." She is a non-traditional returning student and, like me, was unsure how to navigate a field that has not quite come into the mainstream yet. SSDP's Psychedelic Pipeline has provided her with tremendous mentorship—not just through the field of research, but also through indigenous reciprocity, harm reduction techniques, and re-educating the public about the benefits of psychedelic medicine.

**The Current Replacement for Formal Psychedelic Curriculum**

I believe mentorship is an integral part of any career field, especially in the psychedelic science sector whose future is filled with ambiguity. Fortunately, psychedelic career mentorship can be the key to bridging the gap in a field that has few definitive paths. With the potential use of psychedelics to achieve mass mental health, it is vital that the next generation of researchers, therapists, clinicians, policymakers, harm reductionists, and educators are properly supported so that their goals can become a shared reality and for psychedelic-assisted therapy to be equitable and accessible.

Current psychedelic professionals have many tools and connections that can be passed down to young, aspiring psychedelic professionals so their paths may not be so rocky. Mentorship is a two-way street: a constant give and take and exchange of information. Many mentors find their roles to be extremely rewarding and come back to the Pipeline year after year. With the lack of academic curriculums dedicated to instructing people about psychedelic substances and therapies, we turn to psychedelic professionals to be our teachers. Like lessons one may learn from one’s own psychedelic journeys, increased connectivity will only catapult progression.

As I continue my second year in the Pipeline, I greatly look forward to how my mentorship with Anya develops and to continue to create meaningful opportunities and connections for others in the Pipeline. I still do not know exactly where my path will take me, but I have learned the value of embracing the opportunities that are presented to me, even if they aren’t a dream fit. Perhaps more importantly, when opportunities are not being presented, I’ve learned the value of creating my own projects, asking for what I want, and collaborating with like-minded people.

SSDP’s Psychedelic Career Development Pipeline is a unique way for SSDP members and alumni all over the world to step into the field of psychedelics. By prioritizing applicants of color and individuals of marginalized communities, the Psychedelic Pipeline is paving the way for much needed diversity and inclusivity in the psychedelic sciences. If you are interested in joining SSDP’s Psychedelic Career Pipeline, I highly encourage you to join your local SSDP chapter or create your own if there isn’t one nearby—and look out for next year’s **application**!

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**Gina Giorgio** currently resides in North Carolina and works for SSDP’s Psychedelic Career Development Pipeline Program, Psychedelic Spotlight, and NisonCo. She is an active member of SSDP’s U.S. Policy Council and is advocating for drug policy reform in North Carolina, New Jersey, and New York. She hopes her work in psychedelic communications, program development, and policy will increase the prevalence and accessibility of psychedelic substances and therapies and reduce drug stigmas and mental health stigmas. She recently started managing Psychedelic Grad’s Talent Collective to increase psychedelic job connections for young people. She will start her Master’s in Communications at Wake Forest University in the Fall of 2022.