

ONCO-GATOR: *Oncology Networking, Coaching, and Opportunities – Guiding Advancement, Training, and Onboarding for Researchers*

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1. Background

Academic cancer centers face recurring challenges recruiting, training, and retaining oncology investigators. The UF Health Cancer Institute (UFHCI) created a mentoring program, ONCO-GATOR - Oncology Networking, Coaching, and Opportunities – Guiding Advancement, Training, and Onboarding for Researchers, to address this need through a combination of standardized onboarding, structured mentorship, and professional training opportunities. The program enables transmission of tacit institutional knowledge, informal networks, and organizational culture essential for clinical research success. The goal is to provide useful experiences and resources for early-stage investigators (ESI) to advance their research and establish a national presence, facilitating career satisfaction and retention.

2. Goals

- Create a professional learning community for investigators
- Develop a reproducible mentoring experience
- Facilitate transmission of tacit knowledge and organizational culture
- Improve investigator retention

3. Solutions and Methods

ONCO-GATOR was launched in July 2025. The program consists of three integrated components: online onboarding course, eight-month mentorship program, and clinical trial bootcamp.

The online onboarding course is delivered through the Canvas learning management system and has six modules that follow the clinical trial lifecycle from activation through close-out, with content that specifically targets UFHCI resources and processes.

After completing onboarding, new investigators are enrolled into the mentoring cohort. The mentorship component was developed using the AXLES (Align, Experience, Launch, Effectiveness, Support) model. The program pairs early-stage investigators with experienced UFHCI investigators. Monthly meetings focus on navigating UFHCI resources, networking with cooperative groups, grant submission, project management, and career advancement. Participants receive structured guides with conversation starters and monthly topic reminders. Cross-departmental pairing provides diverse perspectives, with eight College of Medicine departments represented.

The clinical trial bootcamp delivers two intensive sessions covering concept development and trial execution, with topics including trial design, protocol writing, regulatory requirements, monitoring, data analysis, and publications. The bootcamp targets early-stage investigators but also welcomes staff and

senior UFHCI investigators, fostering knowledge exchange and the development of the professional learning community.

4. Outcomes

Onboarding Course: Eleven investigators were enrolled in 2025; ten completed required training on time. All completed end-of-course surveys indicate course satisfaction and effectiveness.

Mentorship Program: Eleven mentor-mentee pairs were enrolled, representing eight departments in the College of Medicine. Strong engagement was achieved with ten pairs meeting at least once and all eleven pairs establishing communication. Monthly surveys assess satisfaction and effectiveness.

Bootcamp: Session One (Concept Development) had seventeen attendees, including eight early-stage investigators. Survey results showed 80 percent found it effective, 20 percent were moderately effective. All respondents indicated the session would help with the development of investigator-initiated trials; 80 percent said it would help principal investigators. Session Two (Trial Execution) had eighteen attendees, including six early-stage investigators, with survey results showing 100 percent effectiveness ratings and unanimous agreement on practical utility.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

ONCO-GATOR demonstrates strong first-year adoption and satisfaction rates, positioning UFHCI investigators for clinical trial success and career advancement while building sustainable institutional knowledge transfer systems and collaborative opportunities.

Inaugural cohort conclusion in mid-2026 will assess investigator confidence, satisfaction, and faculty retention correlation. Additional metrics to be analyzed include investigator publications, national committee memberships, and leadership roles.