

EEB Graduate Mentor Guide

Updated September 2022

Congratulations—you’ve been matched with an EEB Undergraduate Mentee! Not sure what to do next? Refer to this guide to get started! Plus, we’ve included lots of extra information on how to guide your mentee. You don’t have to read this guide all at once—this resource is available to you anytime for your reference. If you have any questions, get in touch with us at eebmentoring@gmail.com.

Getting Started

Mentoring brings profound and lasting benefits to science and society. A mentor should advise as a topic expert, help their mentee in managing a work–life balance, prepare them to advance to the next career stage, and help them to establish a professional network. Mentoring is a flexible process and should fit to the needs of the mentee while helping to move them along towards their goals and objectives. Although we’ve provided a guide to the first four mentoring sessions with your mentee, allow them to set the tone and focus on what they need. So, let’s get started!

Once you’re matched with your mentor, please reach out to them with a quick email and introduce yourself. You might want to share a bit about your background or professional history and what you’re researching as a graduate student. Plus, you’ll also want to share the “human” side of you—life isn’t all work! What do you like to do for fun? What are your hobbies? Be sure to also ask about your mentee’s career goals and what they want to get out of mentoring. Ask about how their classes are going and what topics they find most interesting. Be patient—it may take your mentee a while to respond. Undergraduate students have very busy lives which involves balancing full-time class schedules, extracurricular activities and obligations, work outside of classes, and more. If they don’t respond to your email about the first meeting, wait a week, and then try again. If they still don’t respond after your third attempt in contacting them, ask your mentee if they would still like to be involved in the program or if they would like to be removed from the mailing list. If your mentee is no longer available to participate in this program, please be sure to email eebmentoring@gmail.com to let us know.

Once you’ve contacted your mentee and you have a conversation going, set up a time to chat with them for your first mentoring session! You can meet up over coffee, chat while taking a walk around campus, or even over Zoom—whatever makes you and your mentee most comfortable.

Relationships between mentors and mentees are often quite challenging because you don’t really ever get training in how to be a mentor or a mentee. And, you need to get to know another person quite well in a short period of time. Some mentees might have a clear objective in mind when it

comes to what they need from a mentor; other mentees might need some extra help and structure. To help your mentoring relationship become the best it can be, we've outlined discussions for four mentoring sessions. Keep scrolling to get started!

Meeting with Your Mentee

(Adapted from Letters to a Pre-Scientist)

Set up regular meeting times throughout the semester with your mentee; try to meet at least 4 times per semester, or as it fits with your schedule and work.

You can meet via Zoom, over coffee, in the park—whatever works best for you! By meeting with your mentee regularly, you can develop a meaningful relationship with your mentee and you can better support them in pursuing their goals and objectives.

Unsure of what to talk about? Consider using a “theme” for each of your mentoring sessions to help guide your conversations.

What you put into your mentoring relationship is what you get out of it. For mentees, we want them to think about their interests, needs, and future. What areas of science are they interested in? Do they have plans once they graduate? Are they feeling nervous about what happens once they finish their undergraduate degree? Think back to how you felt during and after your undergraduate career—what was your academic journey like? When did you feel unsure and nervous? If you could give a piece of advice to your past self, what would that be? For mentees, ask them to take some time to reflect on their goals for the short- and long-term, and what kind of questions or uncertainties they have.

Mentoring Session 1: STEM Career Pathways

For your first mentoring session, take some time to introduce yourself! Feel free to share information like where you are from, why you decided to pursue graduate research at UTK, what science topics you like (or don't like!), if you are a Master's student or a PhD student, some of your hobbies—whatever you want! But, be mindful of how you come across; this mentoring relationship is for your mentee. Talking about all of your accomplishments, awards, and everything that you have done can come across as intimidating. Focus on your passion and why you love doing what you do. Give your mentee the spotlight to share about themselves and where they are in their undergraduate career and life; there aren't any expectations in this mentoring relationship, other than for your mentee to feel comfortable, accepted, and supported. If you or your mentee are

feeling stuck and not quite sure which questions you should ask or discuss, here are some topics that you can talk about in regards to your career pathway and what it's like being an EEB graduate student:

1. Where do you do your research? Are you mainly based in the lab, in the field, or do you use a computer to do your research? Do you travel frequently?
2. What does a typical day for you look like? Do you work by yourself, or with lots of other people? Is your work the same from day-to-day or does it change a lot throughout the year?
3. What type of science do you research in EEB? Are you more focused on ecology or evolutionary biology—or do you study a more interdisciplinary topic?
4. What kind of research questions guide your research? What's the “big picture” of your research? What are you hoping to accomplish in the long-term?
5. What's something unexpected about your research that most people wouldn't know about?
6. What's the best part or most exciting part about your research? And, what's the worst part (or work that you like doing the least)?
7. Beyond your research, what else do you or other graduate students do? Do you teach? What kind of coursework have you done?
8. What's it like being in the EEB program?
9. Outside of research, what do you like to do for fun? Hobbies? Sports?

Mentoring Session 2: Higher Education Journeys

Everyone's journey to graduate school is different. Some folks decided to take time off between their undergraduate degree before pursuing graduate school—others go directly from undergraduate to PhD program! And others may spend years working in industry jobs before deciding to return to graduate school. There's no *right* path when it comes to higher education, and your path to graduate school is unique as well! This particular mentoring session should focus on your higher education journey and that of your mentee. Where have you been—and where are you going? Share some of your journey with your mentee and also for discussion/reflection as you describe your experiences. Ask them how their journey has been different from yours or if they identify any similarities. Ultimately, this session should help to foster a broader discussion between you and your mentee about their academic journey and where they want to go next. Here are some questions to get you started:

1. What did you study during your undergraduate and why? Is it different or the same from what you are studying now?
2. What did you do when you finished your undergraduate degree?
3. When did you start thinking about graduate school? What were some of the first steps in your search for graduate advisors and graduate programs?
4. How did you decide where to apply, or who to work with? What were some of your limiting factors?
5. Were you excited, anxious, worried, etc. before you started graduate school?
6. What are some of the common requirements for graduate school programs?

7. How has your graduate school experience compared to what you thought it was going to be—were your expectations similar or different from reality?
8. During this process of going from undergraduate to graduate, did you ever feel like you didn't fit it or that you didn't belong? How did you react to those feelings and how did you overcome those situations?
9. Do you have more than one degree or did you attend multiple institutions of higher education? Did you know you wanted to pursue graduate school when you began your college journey? If not, how did you decide it was right for you?
10. What kind of opportunities did you experience during your higher education journey? How have they impacted you and where you are now?

Mentoring Session 3: Overcoming Obstacles

Let's face it—the real world is tough! And mentoring should be real as well. Everyone faces unique professional and personal obstacles; the challenges that you face may or may not be the same ones that your mentee has faced. Some obstacles are deeply personal, and may be stories or topics you are or aren't comfortable sharing. That's totally fine! This session is for you and your mentee to share and discuss the tough parts of academia (and life!) and how to overcome challenges. Just know that you aren't alone—everyone has and will face obstacles. Being vulnerable and identifying commonalities can deepen relationships. Throughout anyone's career journey, there will be plenty of obstacles and one of the hardest parts is knowing when you need help and where to find it. This session can be pretty flexible and you should try to identify, understand, and reflect on hardships that your mentee has endured. However, don't try to "fix" problems or obstacles that they are facing; sometimes, mentees just need to be heard. Lend an ear, be kind, and provide empathy. Sometimes, just saying "that sucks" and "I understand" can provide a lot of relief. Give them space to share their struggles and if they ask for help or feedback, then offer some suggestions. Here are some questions that both you and your mentor can discuss:

1. What's an obstacle that you faced during the COVID-19 pandemic? Did you develop or find any strategies that helped you navigate this tough time? What did you learn about yourself in the process?
2. What's a critical moment during which you realized that a challenge you thought was previously impossible was actually surmountable. What changed about your mindset or approach that helped you realize that you could overcome the obstacle? What happened?
3. Have you experienced a situation in which you eventually became comfortable that at first you felt like you didn't belong, or with people you thought wouldn't accept you? How did you feel, what happened to allow you to overcome those feelings?
4. Do you think it's important to be able to persevere in the face of hurdles? Why? Is it ever better to not conquer a hurdle and just walk away from it? If so, how do you know when to push forward and keep trying, and when to step back and move on?
5. Reflect on your time as an undergraduate student. What aspect(s) of your undergrad (and about what will happen after your undergraduate career) were or are you most afraid or worried about? Was your worry justified? How did you manage your worries? What did you learn about yourself?

6. Tell a story of the most difficult thing you've ever accomplished. What made it so difficult, and how did you change or grow as a result?

**As a note, if you think that your mentee is struggling with especially severe problems or may be in danger, an abusive situation, or otherwise, please contact eebmentoring@gmail.com ASAP.*

Mentoring Session 4: Reflect and Inspire

Now that you've had three sessions with your mentee, you should have a good idea of who your mentee is and conversely, your mentee should also feel like they know you pretty well! This fourth session should be flexible; as always, feel free to discuss whatever you want. But, if you need some extra structure to your meetings, take this session to discuss some of your mentee's bigger career and life questions. What's next for them? Are they feeling unsure about the future or if graduate school is the right choice for them? These are the kinds of questions that you should explore (carefully) with your mentee. Sometimes it helps to just talk about these questions; some mentees find it useful to talk more concretely about their short-term goals in the next 5 years. Other mentees may find these questions very overwhelming and scary; be there to walk them through these discussions about the future. If your mentee is feeling anxious, help them realize that the future is an exciting time! Whatever your mentee needs, whether they need someone to act as a sounding board for their career ideas or someone to help them prioritize their goals and make a roadmap for their career, make this session about your mentee! Here are some additional questions to guide this session:

1. What's something interesting or unexpected that you've learned about me, your mentor? And, what have you learned about your mentee that you find to be really cool?
2. What kind of knowledge or advice have you learned from me? What will you do with that new knowledge? Was there some advice that just didn't really apply to their life/career?
3. What is some professional or personal advice or words of wisdom that you—the mentor—can share with your mentee that would translate to their place in life right now?
4. What do you—the mentor—show yourself respect and care? How does practicing self-love help you succeed in your career?
5. What's a mantra or positive affirmation that you—the mentor—use when you're feeling down or discouraged? How does it help to improve your attitude and mindset?

General Mentoring Tips

(Adapted from Colorado State University's Effective Mentoring)

Establish a Relationship

Proper mentorship establishes a unique relationship that helps mentees discover their own motivations, future expectations, personal life balance, and how to achieve professional independence. To foster these relationships, mentors must first listen but also share their own

passions, goals, and experiences of both success and failure. Mutual respect and clear expectations are the key ingredients for the relationship's success. Yet, we all have our own personalities, and some relationships are challenging. Sometimes the best person for the work may not be the easiest to work with. With time and wisdom, using a good dose of self-knowledge of your own limits, effective mentors can learn to establish productive relationships with a broad range of personalities.

Take the Time

Effective mentoring occurs through frequent and regular, one-on-one meetings. Certainly, mentors also have limited time and are not always available to their mentees, but you should be sensitive to their needs. Effective mentors arrange their own time to be productive in their own work, but also to stay fully engaged with mentees and dedicate the time that they need. Time has both quantity and quality; mentees need both. Fortunately, any time works.

Sharing Your Passion, Ideas, and Network

What gets you out of bed in the morning? Hopefully, your answer is love and passion for what you do—but sometimes coffee is necessary, too. Our mentees need to feel our passion for research! Listen to your mentee and be responsive to their current thinking processes, like brainstorming ideas, listening to their (often of out-of-the-box) thoughts, and incorporating them in the idea-refining process. All of these things enrich their experiences and help them mature as scientists. Similarly, invite mentees to your world—maybe you can help them with a research project or you can introduce them to your network of colleagues. Mentors are the door to their mentees' academic career: make it wide-open and exciting to pass through! And, even if academia isn't for them, enthusiastically help them navigate to the path that they're interested in.

Don't Expect Your Mentees to be Like You

Each mentee is different from their mentor and from other mentees; every mentee requires a specific mentoring approach. Effective mentors should make the effort to get to know each mentee as a person and target their mentoring approaches and expectations accordingly. And, to be honest, there are no "real" expectations in a mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees should be dedicated to showing up, listening, and supporting one another. Again, this approach becomes even more important now that many mentees will pursue careers outside of academia. An effective mentor needs awareness of the different and changing mentoring needs and the flexibility to meet them.

Mentoring Never Ends

As we have gone back for advice to our best mentors throughout our careers, so our mentees will continue to need us. Being an effective mentor means staying in touch with your former mentees, making sure they know they can count on you if they need it. Effective mentoring is passed on and improves through generations of academics. Think about important mentors in your life—what made them become such an integral part to your career, to your well-being? How can you emulate that?

Leading by Example

Words of wisdom fall short if they are not demonstrated by consistent behavior and actions. Mentoring occurs all the time and sometimes is even most effective when we do not realize it. The most effective transfer of passion for research, work–life balance, collegiality and inclusiveness, respect, and work ethic occurs through everyday examples. As mentors advance in their careers and have fewer opportunities for all of the above, the effectiveness of leading by example, fortunately, grows stronger.

THINGS TO CONSIDER FOR MENTORS

THE BASICS OF MENTORING

- Lead by setting a good example.
- Teach important values, including research integrity, ethics, inclusion, diversity.
- Provide resources for both academic and non-academic support.
- Scientific mentoring goes beyond turning projects into publications.

TAILOR YOUR MENTORING STYLE

- Mentoring is not “one size fits all”, some students need freedom, whereas others need a more hands-on approach.
- Promote a healthy work/life balance, with the student in mind.
- Make sure to provide support for potential mental health issues.

THE BE'S OF MENTORING

- Be available.
- Be honest.
- Be understanding.
- Be supportive.
- Be fair (and give credit to students).
- Be awesome!

CAREER SUPPORT

- Guide the student towards the goal **THEY** want to reach.
- Support the student no matter which career path they choose.
- Write recommendation letters.
- Help build their network.

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Creating a Positive Mentoring Environment (Adapted from *The Art of Mentoring*)

Mentoring helps people to focus on the challenges and arrive at their own solutions. In discussions between a mentor and mentee, two main methods are used: “pulling” and “pushing”. Pulling calls on the ability to offer a safe place where the mentee feels able to share their agenda, interests, and goals. Also, to offer support by listening, asking the right questions and drawing out the mentee’s own answers to problems. Pushing, on the other hand, calls on the ability to offer stimulation through creative ideas, challenges, knowledge, success stories, models and tools, leading-edge thinking, and wisdom. Good mentors balance these two approaches. When in doubt, they “pull” rather than “push”. Why? The mentee should be the focus so they can pursue their agenda. That way, the mentor ensures the mentee finds the meeting personal and practical. Here are several suggestions on fostering a positive mentoring environment:

Be Genuinely and Actively Interested

How do you show you are interested? Good mentoring is about giving your undivided attention to the mentee. From the moment the meeting starts to the point you say goodbye, your mentee needs to feel that you really do value them and your shared relationship. Even though you are in a mentoring position, don’t “lord” that over your mentee; treat your mentee as an equal and value their input and thoughts.

Inquire with Questions

Ask open questions, such as those that start with what, why, where, when, who and how. Sometimes it feels more natural to prefix the open question with; “tell me”, “describe” or “explain”. Some mentoring discussions will feel more like a 50/50 mix, but try to have your mentee talk more than you do (remember, you’re here to listen and help guide your mentee!).

Test Understanding

When the mentor is spending most of their time actively listening, it’s important to “play back” what is heard. This method of summarizing allows the mentee to confirm that what the mentor says is a true record. It shows that the mentor has been listening accurately and as a result helps to build and develop trust—as well as understanding.

Empathize

This is a key skill! Mentors should not just listen to their mentees, but take the time to really understand their feelings and perspectives. Building empathy can take a bit of practice, as it relies on you being able to connect with your mentee and putting yourself in their shoes. A useful technique is to use the word “must”: “I can understand that it *must* have been very upsetting for you when... Can you share with me more about how that experience made you feel and why?” It

shows that you believe and value your mentee by focusing on the feelings presented. Always present empathy with respect, understanding, and genuineness.

Neutralize Your Feelings

It is natural for us to be biased and hold our own prejudices, whether we are aware of them or not. These biases may be positive or negative. As a mentor, it's important that our thoughts and emotions are held in check because of the signals that it can send. For example, if you say to your mentee, "Are you sure that is the best way to dress if you're going to an interview?" This suggests YOU disapprove. As an alternative, try "Tell me how you are going to prepare for your interview?" Keeping the dialogue adult-to-adult (as opposed to a power dynamic-laded relationship of mentor-to-mentee) is key in creating a positive mentoring environment.

Resources to Ensure Safe, Inclusive Conditions in the Field and in the Lab

- [Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic](#)
- [Field Operations Safety Manual](#)
- [Field Research: A Graduate Student's Guide](#)
- [Field Secrets: A Field Guide to Living in the Field](#)
- [Mental Health in the Field](#)
- [Recreating Wakanda by Promoting Black Excellence in Ecology and Evolution](#)
- [Safe Fieldwork Strategies for At-Risk Individuals, Their Supervisors and Institutions](#)
- [Safety and Belonging in the Field: A Checklist for Educators](#)
- [Safety Guidelines for Fieldwork](#)
- [Security Guidelines for Field Research in Complex, Remote and Hazardous Places](#)
- [Ten Steps to Protect BIPOC Scholars in the Field](#)

Resources Documenting Harassment and Discrimination in the Field and in the Lab

- [Academic Sexual Misconduct Database](#)
- [Birding While Black](#)
- [Environmental Experiences Have Racial Roots](#)
- [Harassment, a Field Study](#)
- [Scientists Push Against Barriers to Diversity in the Field Sciences](#)
- [Sexual Harassment is Common in Scientific Fieldwork](#)
- [Signaling Safety: Characterizing Fieldwork Experiences and Their Implications for Career Trajectories](#)
- [Study Digs into Sexual Harassment During Fieldwork](#)

- [Survey of Academic Field Experiences \(SAFE\): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault](#)
- [Women Scientists Sexually Harassed While Doing Fieldwork](#)

Addressing Harassment, Discrimination, and other Negative and/or Hurtful Interactions

- When taking on a new job, know what policies, processes, and protections are in place regarding sexual harassment, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, bullying, and/or other hurtful/negative interactions. Get copies of these materials; these are just as important as a copy of your contract, so hold on to these and make sure that you have them handy. Request that your supervisor goes specifically over information related to Human Resources (HR) and what resources and services are available.
- If someone harasses you, you must respond. Although difficult, be strong and commit these lines to memory: “Do not talk to me like that; your language is inappropriate” and “Do not touch me; your touch is unwanted.” In the case of an investigation or other inquiry pursuant to harassment, you will be asked if you made it known to the perpetrator that you were not comfortable or that the perpetrator knew that what they did was inappropriate.
- When harassment occurs, document it. Document everything. In the event that an investigation arises in association with a sexual harassment claim, you will absolutely need evidence. If something happens, write it down immediately. Jot it down in an email to yourself and note the date, time, exact quotes (if possible), and the names of any other people that were present during the incident (you might need to contact them in the future to corroborate your own claim). Or, if you receive an email, text, phone voicemail, or other communication from the perpetrator, keep it. Moreover, if you have repeat incidents of sexual harassment (e.g., a colleague continually makes inappropriate, sexual comments to you) from a specific person, record these conversations and comments.
- Report your claims and follow-up with the appropriate chain-of-command. Stick with it. Find the courage and bravery within yourself to face these uncomfortable situations. Demand what is yours: closure, safety, justice. You name it. It’s yours—claim it. For more information, click [here](#).
- For additional resources, consult [The Fieldwork Initiative](#) and [In the Field](#) from ADVANCEGeo.

**If you are facing any form of trauma, violence, or don’t feel safe while in the field or anywhere else, get yourself to a safe place as soon as possible. If that is not possible, complete this [form](#) via The Fieldwork Initiative so they can help you.*