

Mentors: Peers with Knowledge and More!

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It is often understood that students will usually ask their peers for help before going to their professor. This student-to-student relationship is precisely why the job of the peer mentor exists. Having previously been a lab mentor for Biology 120 and currently serving as a mentor for Biology 220, I have a great deal of experience being a peer mentor. Let me first start off by explaining more about what a peer mentor is.

Being a peer mentor is like being a mini teacher, as you are expected to have sufficient knowledge of the topics at hand and be able to satisfactorily answer the questions of your peers. The peer mentor is someone who has taken the class already, and, as such, is usually one grade older than the students enrolled in the course. The mentor also provides insight into how to construct and test a valid experiment and can offer tips for studying and preparing for exams. Finally, mentors also know the ins and outs of how the professor grades, allowing for precise correction of projects and a clear understanding of what is expected from the students.

The small difference in age from mentor to mentee fosters a unique peer-to-peer relationship. Thus, students feel comfortable asking a mentor for help and do not have the same anxiety that can sometimes be associated with asking a professor for help. Professor Menke, who is currently teaching Bio 220 (Ecology & Evolution), comments that peer mentors serve a dual purpose; “[Peer mentors] are often the first line of defense (i.e. students working with dangerous chemicals or wandering out in the woods),” and he also adds that peer mentors can provide more individual help for the student: “A professor can only be so many places at once; a peer teacher can help monitor and provide more assistance.”

Having an extra set of eyes when it comes to safety as well as receiving help with concepts is very important. Randen Troche '12 (a student in the Bio 220 class that I mentored) values the mentor program from a student's perspective because “[Peer mentors] have experienced advice and are easy to talk to.” This recurring theme of openness and availability is perhaps the greatest strength of the peer mentor program. In addition to being available to help students with questions, the mentor must be present during the four hours of lab time each week and also must hold one office hour each week.

Being a peer mentor is rewarding not only because I can help my peers but also because it is a valuable leadership experience that can enhance any professional school application. Professional schools, masters programs, and PhD programs look for students with mentor roles because it demonstrates that the applicant has a good understanding of the material covered and is also

able to relay that knowledge and experience to others. In regards to picking a peer mentor, Professor Menke states that he is looking for “students that had a good grasp of the material and seem to have an ability to communicate well with other students.” An enthusiasm for ecology, in this case, does not hurt either. This aspect of being both knowledgeable and relatable makes a professional school applicant look even more appealing and may provide candidates with a unique experience that sets them apart from other applicants.



Allie Urbanik '13 preps for a day of mentoring in the field for an Ecology & Evolution lab

In summary, accepting a lab mentor position requires budgeting out several hours a week and being prepared to help students with their questions both in the field and in the classroom. A peer mentor must have a strong grasp of the concepts covered and must also be someone that peers can relate to. Being a peer mentor can also be highlighted as a unique quality and experience when it comes time to apply for postgraduate programs. Personally, I find being a lab mentor extremely rewarding because I get to help my peers understand concepts that will be built on in later classes as well as cultivate personal relationships with these students. In my experience, the relationships created while being a peer mentor often transform into being a close, knowledgeable friend.

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