

# CALS Graduate Peer Mentor Activities

## 2019-2020

Over the past year CALS' seven *Graduate Peer Mentors* worked to build relationships among graduate students in their respective programs through one-on-one and group peer-mentoring activities. This document provides brief summaries and reflections. For access to each of the Mentor's final reports, or for more information on the CALS Graduate Peer Mentoring initiative, contact: [Rebecca\\_dunning@ncsu.edu](mailto:Rebecca_dunning@ncsu.edu).

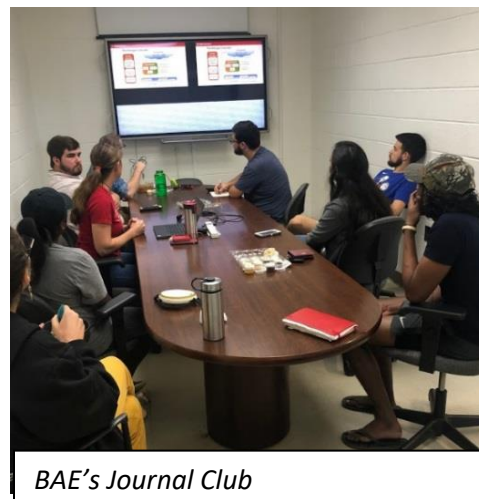
New cohorts of Graduate Peer Mentors are recruited each spring.



*The CALS Graduate Peer Mentors: Left to right: Brandon Huber (Horticulture), Micaela Hayes (Food Science), Lindsey Becker (Ent/PP), Jamora (Ent/PP), Mauri Hickin (Ent/PP), Matthew Warren (Poultry Science), Alison Deviney (BAE)*

## Biological and Agricultural Engineering

Graduate Peer Mentor **Alison Deviney** co-chairs BAE's Graduate Student Association (GSA) committee for Professional Development. Due to the diversity of the department, students are often siloed within their own research groups or individual projects. To encourage more engagement with other students and to help develop long-term peer networking relationships and interpersonal skills, Alison structured her mentoring work around the below three initiatives. She will continue supporting these in 2020-2021 as she continues to co-chair the GSA's Professional Development committee.



*BAE's Journal Club*

### **Student Chat Form**

BAE grad students were encouraged to become members of a GroupMe chat forum, which currently has 34 members and about a dozen students who regularly post.. While the group is small, those who participate share spontaneous group events and get-togethers. Incoming graduate students will be encouraged to sign up for the group chat “on the spot” at the fall and spring orientation meetings, and at the GSA events and meetings.

### **Moodle page to advertise professional development and mentoring opportunities**

Alison created the BAE Moodle page, and she devotes ~2 hours each month to update new events and archive older events. The page was advertised via a fall flyer and reminder emails in Spring 2020. Use of the page is still limited. As with the student chat forum, the BAE GSA will advertise and continue to update the page in 2020-2021.

### **Professional development or mentoring seminars hosted by GSA**

GSA hosted a seminar on data management and a Recent Alumni Panel, and began to support a nascent Journal Club. In the club students discuss journal articles and celebrate birthdays and accomplishments. These meetings of typically 6-8 students foster some great peer discussion that includes peer advice and support. GSA will continue to host professional development seminars and the journal club in 2020-2021.

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## **BAE Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection**

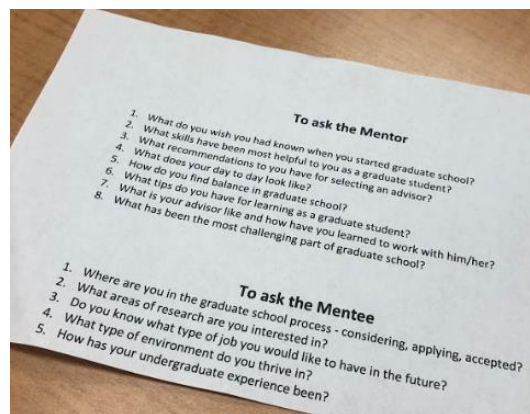
*The BAE Department refers to its members as the “BAE family.” One of the biggest challenges our department faces however, particularly with graduate students, is feeling isolated from others. This is due to the great diversity of research area and widely varying class and fieldwork schedules that make it difficult to bring people together in regular face-to-face engagement. My program goal was to try to break down those silos and help students engage and interact with each other, using technology as a platform and discovering student interests. The mentoring idea behind this goal was to help foster communication, empathy and inclusion among graduate students, which would naturally lead to mentoring between existing and new students. Perhaps the biggest challenge has been convincing more new students to appreciate the benefits of committing time to engage with others outside of required classes and research activities. Students are so focused on their work it can be difficult to even think about life beyond that. I’d like to focus in the future on helping students see the value in investing time in this type of focused group engagement as part of their personal and professional development.*

**Alison Deviney, April 2020**

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## Food Science

Responding to undergraduate interest in attending graduate school, Grad Peer Mentor **Micaela Hayes** organized two (fall and spring) speed networking session to give undergraduates the opportunity to meet and talk with graduate students in Food Science. Micaela provided discussion points for the attendees, and contact cards for each mentor to give to interested undergraduates for follow-up conversations. The nine graduate students and eight undergraduates attending the event gave positive feedback, and the events were strongly supported by the Department head and DGP.



*Discussion points for attendees at the speed-networking event*



*Food Science held speed-mentoring events between graduate and undergraduate in the fall and spring*

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## Food Science Graduate Peer Mentoring Reflection

The mentoring events were well-received by participants, but their effectiveness was limited by the lack of attendance. Not only did the lack of attendance decrease the reach of the event but it also hindered the enthusiasm and interest of the participants. In planning future events, the focus should be on improving attendance as this will be the key driver for both reaching more people that could benefit from mentoring in this capacity and increasing the enthusiasm for mentoring of those in attendance. A second, or additional option, would be to hold a discussion panel with graduate students, as opposed to (or in addition to) to one-on-one speed-mentoring. For either event, I would not recommend requiring prior signup. Even though for planning purposes it is ideal to know who will be in attendance, I have now realized that people are much more likely to show up the day of than to make the commitment of attending. Thus, for future events, I would recommend not including a sign up survey. Additionally, I recommend advertising this event as a way for undergraduates to learn about the research done in each graduate student's labs, and for undergraduates to explore how they might conduct an undergraduate research project with the grad student. This could incentivize more participation.

**Micaela Hayes, April 2020**

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## Horticultural Science

Graduate Peer Mentor **Brandon Huber** worked to pair seven graduate students who have volunteered to be mentors with incoming students. He presented the idea at the department's graduate student orientation session and facilitated the introductions. While mentors were willing to mentor, just one graduate signed up to be a mentee. Because of the general interest among graduate students to have more professional development activities available at the departmental level, staff from the professional development office of the Graduate School gave talks on resumes/CVs and interviewing and negotiating. These were lightly attended. To build more momentum for professional development, the departments graduate student association is discussing the possibility of having a Professional Development Coordinator (similar to BAE's Professional Development co-chairs, see BAE description, above).

## Poultry Science

Graduate Peer Mentor **Matthew Warren** initiated a pilot peer-to-peer mentoring program for his department by pairing six graduate students to form three mentor-mentee pairs.

Establishing trust among a small group of mentors and mentees served as a foundational objective. To build a sense of accountability, mentees were expected to communicate once a week with their respective mentors, and

mentors were expected to reflect on and share their progress with Matthew, who facilitated connections and provided support and encouragement. In addition to individual mentor-mentee communication, Matthew facilitated eight one-hour group meetings for all members. Topics included the following: a) awareness of diverse communication styles b) macroaggressions and implicit bias c) finding your 'why' d) group problem-solving techniques e) peer coaching f) role-play of common difficult situations faced as a graduate student. All members completed an anonymous mid-year survey. Findings from the survey led the group to extend the monthly meeting time to 90 minutes, and to schedule all monthly meetings for the subsequent semester.



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## Poultry Science Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection

*When starting/continuing a program, having a vision of what the objectives are is key to the program's success. I started this program with a simple vision of trying to build awareness of peer mentoring with my peers in my department. By starting off small and keeping that vision in mind, I built this program to help my peers recognize the importance of being there for each other. Seeing how some of my peers became more open to asking for advice or help illustrates that this program achieved the vision I had for it. There were three areas that could be improved upon. 1. Mentors did not consistently provide weekly updates to the program facilitator.. Figuring out a way to ensure accountability with the mentors is recommended. 2. The size of the program worked well for a single facilitator; however, a question for future people who wish to manage this program is what size? A larger program ensures more involvement between students in the department, but it comes with potential issues such as time commitment for whoever manages the program and interpersonal connection is less if there are more people, and that can alienate those who enjoy small groups. 3. This program, partially due to the pilot nature, was exclusive. I personally selected students who I thought would fit, but my own personal biases also made me avoid students that I thought would create potential friction. It is possible that having some control of selection would be important as a method for ensuring that students involved want to be involved versus students who want to be part of something only for perks.*

**Matthew Warren, April 2020**

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## Entomology and Plant Pathology

With a department that is spread across several campuses, Graduate Peer Mentors in Entomology and Plant Pathology—**Lindsey Becker, Jamora Hamilton, and Mauri Hickin** --thought it was crucial to link incoming students with experienced students who could provide advice regarding classes, how to balance classes with research, and how to be involved with the department. The three mentors requested that mentors and mentees meet on a monthly basis and stay connected between meetings. They anticipated that most incoming students would need the most support during the first semester, and established pairings as soon as possible to ensure that new students had a mentor to reach out to when needed.



*Entomology and Plant Pathology's Mentor-Mentee Mixer*

Ten experienced graduate students were recruited to act as mentors to 10 incoming graduate students. Students were introduced at a mixer early in the semester, and the mentor-mentee pairings were monitored using bi-monthly surveys. Two brown-bag lunch presentations on mentoring were scheduled, but both were canceled due to extenuating circumstances (weather; COVID-19). The mentoring program will be continued in the 2020-20201 academic year.

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## **Entomology & Plant Pathology**

### **Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection**

*The implementation process went well, with a great deal of faculty support. Everyone enjoyed getting to know each other at the fall mixer and had fun doing icebreaker activities. It was difficult to get high participation in the monthly feedback surveys, and without having additional in-person group meetings we were unable to address questions and concerns mentioned in the surveys. We suggest arranging topics and speakers for meetings and brown bag lunches early in the semester so that if there are cancelations or schedule changes, there can be another event to take its place. Sending out general peer mentoring discussion topics, perhaps on a monthly basis, could also be helpful as this would give the mentor-mentee pairs ideas for discussion, and serve as a reminder to meet.*

**Lindsey Becker, Jamora Hamilton, and Mauri Hickin, April 2020**

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