

CALS Graduate Peer Mentors

2020-2021 Summary & Reflection

CALS' six *Graduate Peer Mentors* faced a challenging atmosphere in 2020-2021, with all of their peer mentor activities confined to the virtual space. This included a cross-college peer mentoring activity led by returning peer mentor Lindsey Becker for the 20 Graduate Peer Mentors across the three participating colleges – CALS, CHASS, and Vet Medicine. This document provides brief summaries of their activities and reflections for the year.

For more information on the CALS Graduate Peer Mentoring initiative, contact: Rebecca_Dunning@ncsu.edu. A new cohort of peer mentors will be recruited in August, 2021.

Entomology
& Plant Pathology



Lindsey Becker

Biological & Agricultural
Engineering



Brock Kamrath

Poultry Science



Karlinton Flores



Andrea Rubio

Molecular & Structural
Biochemistry



Grace Scheidemantle

Food, Bioprocessing
& Nutrition Sciences



Monique Templeton

**CALS Graduate
Peer Mentors
2020-2021**

Poultry Science

Graduate Peer Mentors Karlinton Flores and Andrea Rubio both participated--as mentors or mentees--in the Poultry Science peer mentoring program established by 2019-2020 CALS Graduate Peer Mentor Matthew Warren. During that inaugural program three pairs of mentor-mentees participated in eight 60-90 minute group meetings (on topics including implicit bias and communications styles) as well as individual one-on-one conversations, as desired by each pair.



Karlinton Flores



Andrea Rubio

Karlinton and Andrea sought to maintain mentor-mentee communication within the department, but found it to be a challenge. Because of turnover in the student community they found it difficult to maintain the prior peer group. With in-person conversations impossible they tried to recruit mentors and mentees but were faced with Zoom burnout and communication challenges. Pivoting, they dedicated their efforts to develop presentations on the importance of mentoring and mentoring basics. With the new student community growing in 2021-2022, these presentations can be used to instruct and invite students to serve as mentors and mentees.

Poultry Science Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection

We both had a great peer mentor experience last year and wanted to bring the same experience to other students. Unfortunately, this proved difficult both due to COVID and to turnover in the student population in our department. We hope that a new CALS Graduate Peer Mentor and/or representatives in the Poultry Science GSA will pick up on peer mentoring and restart the group and activities this fall.

Andrea Rubio and Karlinton Flores, May 2021

Biological and Agricultural Engineering

Graduate Peer Mentor (GPM) Brock Kamrath co-chairs BAE's Graduate Student Association committee for Professional Development, along with 2019-2020 GPM alum Alison Deviney. Over the past year, Brock sought ways to connect BAE graduate students who were working from home. At the start of the fall semester, he created a shared google sheet for fellow BAE students to contribute their current and previous courses, with the hope of facilitating communication and collaboration between grad students who no longer saw each other in the halls on campus. During this period, he also attempted to continue the Journal Club virtually (established in 2019-2020), but zoom burnout quickly put an end to this attempt. While the Journal Club went on hiatus, a GroupMe chat forum was maintained and new students added. Brock found more interest in monthly lunch and learn offerings, with topics including leadership, dissertation writing, reference managers, personal finance, job applications, and recycling. In the spring semester, as COVID numbers declined and vaccinations increased, Brock helped to initiate outdoor activities and created BAE teams for NCSU intramural sports.



Brock Kamrath

BAE Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection

I want to start by admitting that it has been a difficult year to initiate connections within the department. Through my time as a graduate student, I have come to believe that the best part of being a graduate student is working, interacting, mentoring, and being a mentee within a diverse group of highly motivated and intelligent peers. It is often said that the BAE department considers itself a family and it takes pride in its ability to bring together and connect wonderful people from a variety of backgrounds. However, this year it was as if everyone in the family had moved away, as the work-from-home environment, while absolutely necessary for everyone's safety, severely restricted interaction between graduate students. Because the work-from-home environment was in place prior to the start of the fall semester, my main goal through the program was to facilitate connections between BAE graduate students. I think I was successful in a limited manner. There were about 8-12 graduate students who maintained their involvement with the department through our virtual activities and with whom informal peer mentoring was a success. However, there were several other grad students, mostly the new students from the Fall 2020, whom I never saw. Overall, it seemed like the activities I planned helped maintain connections that had already formed but failed to initiate new connections. I hope that as COVID restrictions end and students return to work on campus that the previous activities like the Journal Club can return, the intramural sports can continue, and the newly initiated virtual seminar series can resume as

an in-person seminar series. We have a GSA transition meeting soon, where the former GPM Alison and I will be able to pass on what we have learned to the next group of students and encourage them to reinitiate the activities that were effectively shut down by COVID and continue some of these new activities.

Brock Kamrath, May 2021

Molecular & Structural Biochemistry

Graduate Peer Mentor Grace Scheidemantle successfully paired five incoming grad students with five existing students, supporting this with suggestions on conversation topics and check-ins. To build more momentum for professional development, the group is discussing ways to add in-person meet-ups to further encourage peer discussion that includes peer advice and support.



Grace Scheidemantle

Molecular & Structural Biochemistry

Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection

Our graduate department currently lacks a strong sense of community. Students tend to only talk to those from their classes or labs and do not reach out further than that. My program goal was to help all the students engage and interact with one another, as well as making sure the first year students feel welcome. As a small department where many students are not always willing to participate, it has been challenging to foster this group communication. Hopefully, as this program continues to exist in our department, students will develop more of an interest in participating. This lack of participation most likely was greatly affected by COVID, as people's schedules were abnormal and everything was being conducted via Zoom. It was difficult to incentivize people to attend meetups via zoom after they had just had a full day of classes and other meetings on zoom. If a similar situation were to occur again, I would recommend trying to plan more structured meetups with preplanned activities that would encourage students to attend even if they are not in person.

Grace Scheidemantle, May 2021

Food Bioprocessing & Nutrition Sciences



Monique's goal was to generate a sense of community and mutual support among the graduate students at the Kannapolis campus. She reached out to both NC State students and those at Kannapolis from other universities. Based on responses from 13 students she held an initial meeting in December, with attendees deciding to create a LinkedIn group to share professional development resources and to meet (virtually) each month to discuss topics of interest.

The 2020-2021 *North Carolina Research Campus Graduate Students Group* was an opportunity to connect graduate students across UNC system universities who would normally not have the chance to meet, especially during a year of social distancing. Despite the challenges of only meeting virtually, the attendees were engaged in networking, professional development, and informational interview sessions. As experienced by other peer mentors, students' interest in and tolerance for Zoom meetings waned as the academic year continued. Monique plans to have a final in-person networking and refreshments meeting before the end of the 2020-2021 Peer Mentor Program.

Monique Templeton

Food Science Graduate Peer Mentoring Reflection

I found that informational interviews held either at the beginning or at the middle of each semester had the highest number of attendees compared to other sessions and to the end of each semester, when students seem to get busier with exams and project deadlines. Based on the 2020-2021 graduate students group, I would encourage that future meetings include in-person professional development sessions, informational interviews with professionals from various fields (such as through panel discussions), and networking sessions with refreshments and interactive activities. I also suggest frequently asking students about their availability for meetings, modifying the date and time of meetings based on the highest rated availability as projects and classes often change their schedule over the year.

Monique Carvalho Templeton, May 2021

Entomology and Plant Pathology

Based on the success of the departmental mentoring program Lindsey had developed as a Grad Peer Mentor in 2019-2020 (along with her colleagues Jamora Hamilton and Mauri Hickin), she was looking forward to building on the peer-pairs and group events held last year. Needless to say, COVID intervened.

In the fall 2020 semester Lindsey surveyed the students in her department to gauge interest in either peer mentoring or undergraduate mentoring, as she had anecdotal evidence that grad students were interested in both. The majority of the responses indicated that students were interested in undergraduate mentoring. As Lindsey notes, “This makes sense as our department has one of the largest number of undergraduate student workers helping out in labs and in the field.”

Based on this interest Lindsey scheduled a seminar on grad-undergrad mentoring. Prior to the seminar Lindsey sent out a mentor self-assessment to get students thinking about what makes a good mentor. Unfortunately, this seminar was cancelled and not rescheduled, with Zoom burnout quickly setting in for everyone. Regardless, Lindsey notes it was good to know that there was interest among students to learn more about undergrad mentoring, and that this subject may be of as great or greater interest than peer mentoring.



Lindsey Becker

Entomology & Plant Pathology Graduate Peer Mentor Reflection

Last year was tough--we had very low cohesion among the grad student cohort. It was also tricky to engage with students across our two-program department. I think ensuring that there is a student present for each program (entomology and plant pathology) within a department would make it easier to plan events and set up peer mentor pairings. I attempted to reach out to a few entomology students to see if they were interested in working on setting up peer mentors, but everyone was too busy or just too overwhelmed with everything going on. I think that if there had been more online events and more engagement in these I would have had better luck in engaging with the new students and setting up peer mentor pairs. It was discouraging to have so little student contact after having such a fantastic peer mentor experience the previous year. I really hope that moving forward with more in person activities we'll be able to rebuild our student camaraderie and ensure that the new students feel like they are a part of the department.

Lindsey Becker, May 2021
