



Mentoring is more important than ever

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#MentorFirst (mentorfirst.org) is an initiative aimed at dispelling negative practices all-too-often still seen in academia, promoting best mentoring practices, and building a community of proactive mentors.

“Many of us in the sciences credit a significant part of our success to the mentoring we’ve received, and it is our responsibility to pay that forward to the next generation of researchers”

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn a boundary line through our collective human experience. As we look back over time, the divide between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic will be striking, as the last two years have fundamentally changed how we live and work. In the sciences, our approach to mentoring students and postdoctoral researchers should be among those changes¹.

It shouldn't take a pandemic for us to recognize that good mentoring is important in academia. It's just the right thing to do. Many of us in the sciences credit a significant part of our success to the mentoring we've received, and it is our responsibility to pay that forward to the next generation of researchers. And our future depends on it. Between pandemics and global warming, science is central to solving some of the biggest challenges we face as a society, and the effort we spend mentoring the future scientists who will address those challenges has the power to positively impact society.

The topic of mentoring has certainly been on many people's minds as we have navigated the pandemic. In our own conversations, we found ourselves struggling to balance the usual excitement associated with our own research ambitions with the desire to help our mentees succeed during the most challenging of times.

We recognized, however, that there does not need to be a trade-off between doing outstanding research and being an outstanding mentor². Rather, they can be mutually reinforcing if judiciously prioritized. If research productivity is our top priority, good mentoring does not necessarily follow. However, when we prioritize mentoring and seek to provide each individual with the resources, advice, and support they need to perform at their

best, then research excellence becomes a natural outcome. By mentoring and developing the leaders of tomorrow and empowering them to go on and make their own discoveries, we maximize our ability to make a lasting impact on society.

In parallel with discussing the importance of mentoring, we also reflected on the dearth of formal training or advice that most science faculty receive when it comes to building this skill set³. As a step toward addressing this challenge and promoting positive mentoring practices, we created mentorfirst.org (FIG. 1). The website offers practical steps that research group leaders can employ in order to grow as mentors, which can only benefit research outcomes as well. The website seeks to build a community for those who advocate for strong mentoring, while helping to dispel negative practices all-too-often still seen in academia⁴. As such, through the mentorfirst.org website, group leaders can pledge to be a #MentorFirst by adopting positive mentoring practices. Those who take the pledge can embed a logo on their own research websites in order to show they are committed to positive mentoring practices and further self-growth as a mentor. Moreover, anyone can become a supporter by endorsing the #MentorFirst philosophy and action items.



mentorfirst.org

@MentoringFirst

Fig. 1 | #MentorFirst. Upon taking the #MentorFirst pledge on mentorfirst.org, one can download the #MentorFirst logo (for website posting) to display their commitment to mentorship.

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If being a great mentor took intentionality and effort before the pandemic, it requires even more from us now. Many of our group members have lost a year or more of research time in the lab to develop their practical and critical thinking skills and produce research. At the same time, they are still navigating personal challenges, while feeling disconnected from their peers and support networks. Together, this can create significant pressure, anxiety, and even depression for aspiring researchers⁵, as many feel like they are falling ever more behind compared to where they expected to be. And, while the job market is currently healthy in many sectors, there is a constant looming uncertainty after two years of economic volatility⁶.

As mentors, we cannot give back the time in the lab that students and postdocs have lost, or guarantee what the future will hold. But, we can be intentional in communicating about the importance of mental health and self-care, and creating policies for our labs that support the well-being of each individual⁷. We can also offer to walk alongside each individual as they navigate the ever changing career landscape.

History suggests that the pandemic will eventually recede. However, we can emerge with a greater focus on the importance of developing and supporting the next generation of researchers. This not only has the potential to shape their experience now, but can also serve as a model for them to follow to become better

mentors for future generations of scientists⁸. Improving mentoring can only lead to an improved future for everyone.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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