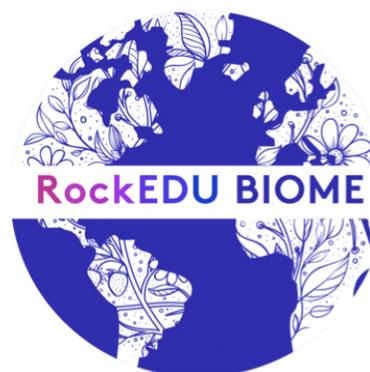


Balancing Identities in Mentorship



Big Ideas

- ★ Mentorship can help a mentee to feel belonging in science
- ★ Identity is part of science and should be included in efforts to uplift mentees

Based on the articles: [Mentoring Underrepresented Students in STEMM: Why Do Identities Matter?](#) and [How I Embrace Diversity in My Lab.](#)

Background

Science is done by *people*. The questions we ask, the paths we traverse, and our very *existence* in scientific spaces are influenced by our identities. Identities can be *complicated*. Some stick with us forever (think: race, ethnicity, place of birth) whereas others may be fluid (think: profession, hobbies, marital status). And, of course, in science as in many fields, not all identities are treated and valued equally. As many scientific institutions continue to have low diversity, issues arise in terms of *actually* supporting the marginalized identities of diverse students. This affects the ability of students to remain in science — either due to the isolation, overt or covert racism or general lack of support. Fortunately, *good* mentorship can hold the key to students feeling supported in science, and having their identities acknowledged (Dahlberg, & Byars-Winston, 2019).

Developing and Sustaining a Science Identity

A central factor that influences whether or not a student will remain in science is the development of a science identity. Developing a science identity not only requires that an individual is viewed as a scientist by themselves (e.g. having the skills,

proficiencies, and opportunities), but also that they are accepted in this role by others. In the case of marginalized individuals specific difficulty arises in where one has demonstrated scientific skills but is pushed out of scientific spaces, due to overt or covert discrimination and not “fitting in” with the majority social identities that tend to comprise science (Dahlberg, & Byars-Winston, 2019).

Finding a mentor who embraces your identities

Mentorship is a *powerful* tool. When done *well*, *mentorship* is deeply intertwined with students’ abilities to develop science identities and even remain in science! But, good mentorship doesn’t come easy...even for those who have a natural propensity for good mentoring relationships. Thinking about mentorship in the context of identities is critical in ensuring that our mentees are able to feel supported, safe and truly thrive within science **whether or not they choose to disclose all of their minoritized identities** (Dahlberg, & Byars-Winston, 2019).

Sometimes having a mentor who matches some of our minoritized identities feels most comfortable, right? Off the bat, there’s an *obvious* connection and degree of mutual understanding. But, this doesn’t necessarily translate to *better* mentoring relationships. More important than sharing identities with a mentor, is having a mentor who strongly supports, listens and advocates for their mentee (Dahlberg, & Byars-Winston, 2019).

Barriers to Success

When mentees are establishing themselves in scientific spaces, it’s not uncommon for them to experience **identity interference**, where one of social identities feels as though it interferes with success in another identity. This may result in a mentee feeling that they have to tone down their identity or maintain separate and academic groups. This has obvious implications for a mentees’ sense of belonging and/or isolation in science.

For many minoritized groups, a lack of support—either by academia or perhaps members of one’s own community —can make the path toward STEM *challenging*. Barriers exist in all sorts of ways, ranging from mentors having “color-blind” approaches to mentoring that makes mentees feel unseen to getting minimal to no professional validation to a dearth of accessibility accommodations. When neuro-diverse and physically disabled students transition from high school to college, there’s a giant decrease in the support available to them. Often, students are asked to obtain their own accommodations, and they may more easily fall behind and/or feel embarrassed about themselves compared to their peers. Throughout



one's path through science any of these barriers could be an impetus for a mentee leaving STEM because they have been convinced that they do not belong.

How Can this Converge in a Real-Life Lab Space?

Acknowledging identities doesn't only matter in a 1-1 mentoring relationship. Often, in science our mentoring relationships are influenced by the broader dynamic and norms in a lab space. In the article [How I Embrace Diversity in My Lab](#), Shomron (2020), the principal investigator (PI) of a lab in Israel, discusses how he creates a culture of unity among scientists by acknowledging and embracing the ethnicities, religions and cultures that make up his lab. Beginning even at the interview process, Shomron makes it clear that lab members must be open to multiple viewpoints and cultures.

...when people join my lab, they converge, first through their mutual interest in science, and then as they get to know one another and extracurricular activities — including yoga classes, rock climbing, and cooking and sharing family recipes. We become a cohesive team (Shomron, 2020)

By creating a space where people can exist comfortably and confidently with their identities, we create healthier and more sustainable relationships with science and our colleagues.

Mobilizing Mentorship provides opportunities for asking questions, sharing experiences and actively listening to one another in the hopes of promoting effective, inclusive and sustainable mentorship practices. If you would like to navigate through this as a group, please refer to the discussion guide questions below.

Discussion Questions

- 1) When did you first develop your science identity? Is there a moment you can pinpoint where you first saw yourself being a scientist?
- 2) What role did mentorship play (or not play) in developing your science identity?
- 3) In reflecting on supporting our mentees' identities, particularly the ones that are not disclosed to us, what sort of norms can we put in place to facilitate comfort?



- 4) Identity Interference looks like having to maintain separate social and academic groups, “toning down” parts of their identity to fit in, and compartmentalize identity components. Have you seen this happen in your lab spaces?
- 5) What do you view as the pros and cons of mentoring (or being mentored by) someone who has different or similar identities to your own? Have you noticed any differences between mentors or mentees who share your identity versus those who don't?
- 6) Accessibility for neuro-diverse and physically disabled students can be a barrier in STEM. How do you broach the topic of accommodations with your mentee?

BIOME (Building Interactive Opportunities for Mentorship Education) is a community that is designed to facilitate connection and collaboration among members of the scientific community at Tri-I (Rockefeller University, MSKCC, and Weill Cornell) around the theme of mentorship.

