



BELLA NGUYEN

*Mentor Matching Engine
2024-25 Mentor Awardee*

A decade of research experience in the biochemistry space and years spent on both sides of mentorship have made Bella Nguyen an incredibly valuable resource to the students she serves. The 2024-25 academic cycle was her fourth year volunteering with the Mentor Matching Engine, where she guides students through their first foray into medical and global health research. She has been consistently revered by her students for her reliable feedback and investment in both their projects and personal lives, earning her one of this year's MME Mentor Awards.

These awards honor mentors who go above and beyond for their students. ISTC had the pleasure of sitting down with Bella to gather her insight on creating meaningful mentorship experiences.

What initially motivated you to become an MME mentor?

I grew up lower income with immigrant parents who weren't able to really guide me on anything, so I learned a lot by trial and error. By the end of college, I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do thanks to some mentors in the research department. One of my very first positions was with the Salk Institute and I remember the grad student I was helping. He talked to me about the difference between doing med school vs. a Ph.D. and shared his personal insight. He was the first person who made me feel like I was capable of anything in a very tangible way. So this is my way of giving back by mentoring other students.

Can you tell us about one of the projects that you mentored and how it relates to your field of work? How were you able to use your experience and research to support that project?

I had a student who was really interested in looking at melatonin and how that would impact cardiac function. She wanted to design a double blind clinical trial. When I was in clinical research for the last five years, I was really good at that. So it was nice giving her my two cents from my experience.

There was something really cool about that project. The previous year, I mentored another student in that same class who also did EEGs. So she had a little bit of extra mentorship from my mentee from last year on how to do the EEGs, how to read them, and how she should go about data analysis.

What was the biggest challenge that you incurred during the mentorship process on MME? How did you overcome it?

I had one mentee this past year who almost never responded and every time he did, there was a personal disaster going on in his life. So it was about drawing the line of helping vs. overstepping—giving him patience while also trying to get him to optimize the mentorship. Persistence and patience were key. I got him onto a video call eventually and we had a really productive session. From then on he tried his best to communicate with me more. I think he realized, “This is a program that I need to be respectful of, but I'm not going to beat myself up for not responding to her every week because she understands.”



You mentored several projects this year. How did you balance them to best ensure that each project received the time and attention it needed?

I made sure I was holding myself accountable. Every Sunday was supposed to be my deadline to communicate with my mentees. As I've gotten older, I've gotten more comfortable admitting my faults. So what I would do if I knew I couldn't provide a thoughtful response to my mentees by that time, is at the very least message them on that Sunday and apologize, give them the immediate response that they needed at the moment, and give a more detailed one later in the week.



What is one skill that you had a chance to develop while mentoring through MME?

Definitely the one I just mentioned—being comfortable showing my flaws to my mentees, just to lead by example. I also got better at communication because there were so many different students. I had to learn to cater to whatever communication styles they preferred. Becoming even more empathetic towards my students and knowing what the most appropriate response or trying to gauge what they need from me was something that I was able to hone more this previous year.



What was one of the non-project specific ways that you supported your students?

I like to check in with them about their well-being first and foremost, because I feel like that's the most important thing that people tend to overlook. There was a student of mine who was involved in figure skating. When the plane accident in Washington DC happened earlier this year, during our subsequent video conference I spent a good 10 or 15 minutes creating space for her to share her thoughts because she had some friends of friends who were on that plane, unfortunately. So I try to remind all my mentees that they're human. That we don't have to always be talking about the project. That they can talk to me about whatever makes them, them.

What is one piece of advice that you would pass on to other MME mentors?

Take space, make space. It's one of my favorite adages. Know when it's appropriate for you to take space to really open up. Be vulnerable to your mentees or rather just be real to them. They're not adults yet, but they're growing into adults. I think that learning to be very open with them and taking up that space is really helpful and it builds that connection. Making space, on the other hand, is knowing when to step back and to really give that stage to the mentees to do their work. Making sure that you're giving them the chance to open up to you.