



## SHAAN ERICKSON

*Mentor Matching Engine  
2024-25 Mentor Awardee*

With a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering, a Master of Business Administration, and years of experience in data science and software development, Shaan Erickson draws upon a unique intersection of expertise areas to serve students on the Mentor Matching Engine. Entering his third year with MME, Shaan will once again bring not only subject knowledge to his mentorship, but also the flexibility and compassion that he was recognized for with one of the 2024-25 MME Mentor Awards.

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

### What initially motivated you to become an MME mentor?

It was actually a suggestion from my wife, who was on the ISTC Associate Board. Throughout my life I've been trying to help mentor the future generations and contribute back as much as I can. When I was going through school I benefited from teachers and mentors who really cared. I felt a sense of wanting to pay it forward and make that difference in other people's lives. It's also a good chance for me to explore topics that I haven't thought about in some time, to be able to learn and grow that way myself.

### What was one thing that you found surprising or unique to MME compared with your past mentorship experiences?

The first thing that really stands out about MME is just how motivated the students are. I've found in various past projects, it's parents trying to get their students involved, so there's a misalignment of incentives where the students aren't as motivated to take advantage of a wonderful program. From that perspective, MME is very unique and very special because it pairs both mentors who want to contribute with students who will appreciate those contributions.

Additionally, MME has the ability to keep projects moving along remotely. I haven't lived in Chicago for several years now, but I don't feel that I'm disconnected from the students there because of how good of a job MME does in making sure there's frequent communication. Despite the distance, there's all these opportunities to continue collaboration.

### What skills and personal qualities did you draw on most when forming relationships with your mentees? How did you earn that student trust?

At the beginning of every project that I mentored in, the students would refer to me as Mr. Erickson, so right off the bat I would say, "Hey, call me Shaan." I think that helped initially set a relationship of being peers. While I am here to offer guidance, I'm not here to be a teacher. Additionally, in every call I took a couple minutes at least at the beginning to talk to the students about how their week was going and what was new in their lives and what challenges they encountered. Letting them steer the conversation helps break the ice. It helps instill confidence. It helps instill comfort. I found it to be very effective.

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

One thing that is difficult as a mentor is offering constructive feedback without being too harsh. Sometimes it felt like I was giving too many pieces of constructive criticism, but I wanted to avoid putting someone down. To overcome that, blending in positive feedback was very effective. Additionally, I would sometimes leave it up to the student and ask, "Hey, I have this idea on something that might be valuable to contribute here. Would you like to hear about it?" Usually the students were very receptive to that approach as opposed to being offered advice when it might not have been particularly welcome.



## Tell us about one of the projects that you mentored. How were you able to use your experience to support that project?

I had one student who was looking into methods to better educate teenagers on how to invest their money in order to prepare for college and post-college savings. To be honest, that's not what I do for a living, but it is something that I think about frequently as I grow older. Because I've gotten experiences from figuring it out myself, that helped me not only give her advice based on what I've learned, but also put myself in her shoes as somebody who's coming into this relatively fresh. Having that relatability with a student helped drive the project forward. I was able to share firsthand experience about what I've encountered, what to look out for, and what to think ahead towards in her project.

## Can you tell us about some of the non-project specific ways in which you supported your students?

Across all of the projects that I was mentoring, a common theme was communication and presentation skills. So there was a lot of discussion not only on how to make their project as good as it could be, but also how to make those improvements more generally. As these folks are going through high school and into undergrad, there's going to be a lot of need for presentation skills and clear writing, so I think it was beneficial to offer that kind of feedback throughout the project.

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

MME was really my first experience providing this kind of feedback to students. A lot of my experience in the past has been with tutoring where there's a right answer. I was an engineering major in undergrad, so every time I tutored, I could say, "This is the way you do it. You do step A, step B, step C." So having to be more conversational was something that was a little bit foreign to me.

Practicing that level of conversation, when we're not here to find the correct answer, we're here to talk through it and see what makes most sense for your project was something that I had never really experienced. Adopting that kind of thinking, especially when working with a high school student, was definitely something new that I picked up along the way.

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

There's a really fine line to walk between driving the conversation and monopolizing the conversation. Try to find that balance as quickly as possible and then be as collaborative as possible. There's a misconception for mentoring that you have to be the one who knows everything and drive the project forward, but it's very much so a give and take. As a mentor, you have to be the first person to give and then things will fall into place from there.