

By Naomi A. Rankin, Matthias I. Gröschel, and Maha R. Farhat

Mentorship at a distance

The year is 2022. It is a warm summer day in Boston, and Naomi, an incoming graduate student, sits in a cafe waiting for two colleagues who have greatly influenced her career—although they’ve never met in person. It was back in 2020 when Naomi, then an undergraduate at Howard University, spent a summer working virtually with Matthias, a postdoc, and Maha, the lab principal investigator, through a Harvard University internship program. Now that the world has managed COVID-19, they are excited to finally meet face-to-face and reflect on that summer experience.

NAOMI: I remember that day in March 2020 when everything seemed to unravel. I was told to evacuate my campus and that classes would be virtual for the indefinite future. While many of my peers’ summer research opportunities were canceled, I was lucky that the Harvard summer internship was scheduled to continue virtually. But I wondered how I would learn a completely new topic and research style from 3000 kilometers and two time zones away. How would I form a relationship with my mentors?

MATTHIAS: Both Maha and I had doubts about the virtual internship format. I had never mentored a student completely remotely, and I knew you had never done this type of research before. I counted on Maha’s experience mentoring students and her optimism that we would make it work.

NAOMI: The biggest challenge for me was not knowing whether I was on track. If we had been working together in person, it would have been easy to casually touch base and get gentle nudges in the right direction when I needed them. But I was too nervous to ask basic questions over video calls and chat, so I relied on trial and error and online tutorials. Then, when I presented my work to you, I was disappointed to learn that the model I had worked on for 2 weeks was completely wrong.

MAHA: I remember that moment well. It became clear then that we needed to reset our expectations and how we communicated. I urged you to use chat liberally and reach out for more frequent short check-ins. As the days rolled on, you seemed to become more at ease asking for help.

NAOMI: It certainly helped that you were present and responsive via telephone calls and chat. I also learned the



**“With a little work,
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importance of making my concerns heard. And when we began to speak more often, I got to see another side of your lives. I never expected to have video calls with Matthias while he was at the playground with his kids!

MATTHIAS: Me neither! Do you remember when my daughter poured water on my laptop? It delayed me terribly in sending over a key figure for your final presentation. I was balancing so much at the time and yet desperately wanted to be there when you needed me.

NAOMI: Yes, that wasn’t the smoothest moment—but ultimately it only strengthened our relationship. Seeing your struggles with working from

home helped me realize that we are all human, navigating through a difficult time together.

MATTHIAS: I enjoyed connecting with you informally; it felt very genuine. It also offered an opportunity to reflect on what kind of mentor I want to be in the “real” world. I hope to carry that forward with me.

MAHA: Losing the connection with mentees was among the hardest aspects of the quarantine for me professionally. Shifting to a more relaxed communication style really helped. It also reinforced my belief that science and scientists should be less aloof and more welcoming, especially to aspiring scientists early in their careers.

NAOMI: The virtual environment made it hard to connect at times—but with a little work, we formed a lasting bond. ■

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