



## Conversation Starters Related to Identity that Foster Student Belonging

*Supporting the identity development of students as they navigate undergraduate research experiences is important in helping them feel that they belong in research spaces. It is important to cultivate a welcoming space, show interest in the student as a whole person, and embrace the connection between their foundational identities and the new identities a student forms within academia. According to Shanahan (2018), this “social-emotional support by mentors has been shown to be even more significant for underrepresented minority students involved in UR than for their peers in the majority.”*

*Many research mentors report wanting students to feel like all of their identities are welcomed and supported. However, some aren't sure where to begin when initiating conversations about identity. These conversation starters were created to allow discussion about identity to flow naturally. When students' answers to these questions are met with curiosity, enthusiasm, and empathy, students may feel more willing to share details about themselves and their identities, which will then allow mentors to show students that all of their identities are welcome in the research space.*

### Early in the mentoring relationship:

- Make sure to share your pronouns and ask if students on your research team are comfortable sharing theirs. Using a student's preferred pronouns is critical when making the student feel that their identities are welcomed in the research space. If you accidentally use the wrong pronoun after being told their preference, correct yourself, apologize one time, continue the conversation, and do your best to not repeat the mistake. It is not appropriate to drag out the apology and expect the student to comfort you for your mistake. If you're not comfortable asking about pronouns, just continue to use the student's name instead of making an assumption about which pronouns they prefer.
  - *I like to be referred to with she/her pronouns. Which pronouns do you prefer?*
  - *Can you remind me which pronouns you use?*
- Start each meeting by checking in on how the student is doing personally. This will help students see that you care about them beyond their ability to execute research. Ask how you can support the student at each check in, allowing space for the student to share what they need weekly, bi-weekly, etc.
  - *How was your weekend? Did you do anything exciting?*
  - *How is your week going?*
  - *How are you doing/feeling today?*
  - *How can I support you?*
  - *If a student seems reluctant to open up, you might consider asking them to share one word that describes how they are feeling that day. This can be a great way to get conversation flowing.*

- Start group meetings with a brief icebreaker question so the team can get to know each other. Many of these questions will open up conversation about students' identities and will help students see that you are interested in learning more about them. Pay attention to their responses so you can ask follow-up questions later.
  - *What is your favorite tradition?*
  - *What is your favorite food to prepare?*
  - *If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would it be?*
  - *What did you want to be when you were growing up?*
  - *Describe an event that was life changing for you?*
  - *What are three important parts of your identity?*
  - *What is the best piece of advice you've received and what importance does that have for you?*
  - *What is something you are looking forward to?*
- Ask the student who they consider to be family or their close support system. Family, however they define it, can play a huge role in our identity development and learning about a student's family is a great way to connect with them. Shanahan (2018) has found that building a bridge between a student's home life and academia can be critical toward building trust and offering socio-emotional support. That being said, if a student seems uncomfortable or hesitant to discuss their homelife or upbringing, do not push them to elaborate. It may be difficult for students with challenging family situations to discuss their relationships. Others may not feel ready to open up about their family dynamics to a supervisor or someone in a position of power.
  - *Where are your family members living? Do you get to visit them often?*
  - *Is your family excited that you're going to [insert institution]?*
  - *Do you have any siblings or nieces and nephews? How old are they?*
  - *I love that you mentioned [insert family recipe] during the icebreaker in our group meeting yesterday. That sounds so delicious. Is it difficult to make?*
  - *It was so fun to hear about your [insert family tradition] during the icebreaker in our group meeting yesterday. How long have you and your family done that? How did it start?*
  - *How do you communicate your research to your family members?*
- Ask about the extracurricular activities the student engages in to learn more about their interests. The way a student chooses to spend their free time can tell you a lot about the things that are important to them. Demonstrate curiosity in their interests!
  - *What kinds of things do you enjoy doing outside of school and research?*
  - *Do you participate in any student-led or affinity groups on campus or in the community?*
  - *What does that engagement look like?*
  - *What do you enjoy about those groups?*

#### **Later in the mentoring relationship:**

- It's always a good idea to start each meeting by checking in on how the student is doing personally, even after you've known them a while. Recognize that students may not feel

comfortable disclosing personal challenges, particularly if they feel like it may negatively alter your impression of them. That is okay – work on building trust and give them time to open up if and when they feel ready.

- *How was your weekend? Did you do anything exciting?*
- *How is your week going?*
- *How are you doing/feeling today?*
- Continue to ask about the student’s family if they seem eager and excited to talk about it. Following up on conversations you had earlier shows the student that you are paying attention to personal relationships that are important to them.
  - *How is your [insert family member] doing? I remember you said your [family member] was getting ready for [insert big life event]. How did that go?*
  - *Do you have any plans to see your family soon?*
- Put yourself in a student’s shoes to connect about things they may be experiencing. Students are more likely to offer details about their lives when you show empathy.
  - *I can’t believe it’s already finals week! I remember that being such a stressful time in school. How are you holding up?*
  - *It’s always such a bummer when the holidays are over. I always miss my family after getting to see them for a few days. Were you able to visit family over the break?*
- Help students build their research identity by positioning them as experts in their work and inviting them to give perspective on the research. Ask questions that help them make connections across different learning pathways to show their expertise can be built in different ways.
  - *What are your thoughts on possible next steps to address this setback?*
  - *What do you think these results will mean for us?*
  - *In a group setting: [Insert student name], do you want to tell [insert visiting researcher or colleague] about your exciting project?*
  - *What are some interesting connections you see between [this] and [that] from [your coursework, degree, extracurriculars, etc.]?*

#### **Notes on delivery:**

- These identity-based conversations will go better if the student knows you’ve been supportive and approachable throughout their research project. Help them feel comfortable and confident throughout their research experience by offering statements like the following: “How are things going? It looks like you’re doing great! Anything I can help with?” This will also help students who are navigating imposter syndrome in the research space.
- Find opportunities to share aspects of your own identities with students, for example, during icebreaker sessions or in conversation with students. Being open about your own identities will help build trust in the relationship.
- Remember that a student's personal and emotional needs may vary at different points in their research experience. Tune in to what mentees are going through by regularly checking in and being a good listener.

- If a student comes to you with a problem, your first reaction may be to try to solve the problem as rapidly as possible. Problem solving is, after all, a fundamental aspect of most research activities. It is important though to really listen to what the student is trying to tell you. Rather than immediately switching into problem solving mode, take time to discuss the matter in a way that validates the student's concerns and ensures that you truly understand the problem before attempting to identify a solution. For example, Shanahan (2018) provides an example of a gay Black male student who opened up to his mentor and told her that he felt like he didn't belong in the program, which was majority-white and majority-female. The mentor responded, "No, that's not true! Everyone loves you!" After this discussion, rather than feeling supported, the student reported that he wanted to leave the program. In this case, the mentor tried to offer the student encouragement, but in doing so, invalidated the students' experiences and further contributed to the problem that the student was experiencing.
- Another way to help students feel like they belong in a research space is to quickly recognize and call out forms of explicit and implicit bias when they occur. Make it known within the research team that no form of bias is tolerated. If you witness an instance of implicit bias, name it right away instead of letting it slide. While it can be awkward to confront bias, especially in a group setting, it is very important to be vocal about group norms that promote inclusion and belonging. Imagine a student or colleague makes a biased statement. Here's one way you could frame the conversation: "I know you probably didn't mean any harm when you said [insert biased statement] but I just want to highlight the harmful implications assumptions like that can have and encourage us to steer away from statements like that."
- Hosting regular DEI meetings can be a great way to make space for team-based conversations about identity and belonging. For example, our team meets twice a month to discuss a different blog post, research paper, or news article related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Each team member is responsible for selecting the reading and leading discussion on a rotating basis.