

UCSD Joins MentorNet, Connecting Students with Scientists and Engineers Employed in Industry and Academia

Rex Graham

The University of California, San Diego has become a partner in MentorNet, a program that uses email to facilitate one-on-one mentoring relationships between successful engineers, scientists and mathematicians, and college students who aspire to careers in those fields. Organizers of the nonprofit program, currently available at 103 participating colleges and universities, are most eager to involve female students and other underrepresented students in these areas.

"While this is not intended to help student protégés complete homework assignments, their mentors can help them decide whether to apply to graduate school or make other career choices," said Jeanne Ferrante, a professor of computer science and associate dean of the UCSD Jacobs School of Engineering. "The nation needs more scientists, engineers and mathematicians and MentorNet is one way to help retain students majoring in those fields. This new program gives these students an incredible opportunity to talk to successful role models who are eager to share experiences gained over many years with companies that face global challenges."

The program is funded by donations from participating companies and annual fees of \$1,000 or more paid by the participating educational institutions. Mentors work for IBM, 3M, Schlumberger, and dozens of other companies and academic and research institutions and government laboratories.

"I created a profile for myself through the MentorNet site, and my mentor has given me a much broader view of what my career can be," said Sashirekha Shanmugavelu, who recently received a master's degree in computer engineering from the University of Minnesota. "It's a simple idea, but the real value for me arose from matching me with a technology consultant for Microsoft. It was a perfect match."

MentorNet has made 15,593 protégé-mentor matches since its formation in 1998. Students often discuss their personal career goals, hopes and dreams, as well as concerns about balancing personal needs with professional aspirations. One such match involved Iris Bombelyn, program director for International Launch Services, a unit of Lockheed Martin based in McLean, VA, and Belle Koven, a senior at Harvard University who plans to graduate in June with a bachelor of arts degree in engineering sciences.

Koven filled out an online questionnaire and a few days later received the first of many emails from Bombelyn. The protégé wants to develop new technology for advanced human space flight vehicles, and the mentor is an accomplished aerospace engineer who works with Russian rocket scientists on an enterprise to launch commercial satellites into earth orbit.

"I would be thrilled to have a career path similar to Iris's," said Koven. "I have a supportive family, but my relationship with Iris is like having an aunt who understands where I want to go and what I want to do. She gives me very helpful advice."

All MentorNet relationships develop via email, a mode of written communication that has become increasingly important to students and professional scientists and engineers. "We started emailing back and forth right away and it's been really a great relationship every since," said Koven. "With a telephone call or in a face-to-face conversation you respond immediately, but with email you have time to sit down and think about it before

responding. It's also nice to go back to something that Iris said in an earlier email, re-read it and say, 'Oh, yes. That's right.' Email is a really good format for something like this."

Mentors have helped protégés qualify for summer internships and other learning experiences and employment opportunities. UCSD's Ferrante hopes that as many as 500 UCSD students will elect to take part in the program, which incurs no cost to the student. "Colleges and universities are painfully aware that too few U.S. students are graduating with degrees in science and engineering, but this kind of program can help retain students majoring in these fields and get them excited about what they're doing."

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