

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Mentoring @ Purdue

Purdue master's student Dottie Vollmer recalls a tough adjustment to her freshman year of college and retreating home every weekend to escape her sense of isolation. "I thought I was the only one feeling that way," she says. Then a female professor in Vollmer's major stepped in to mentor her — and that made all the difference.

Now Vollmer is paying it forward as on-campus coordinator of activities for Mentoring@Purdue (M@P). "I love helping students and faculty connect," she says. Under the guidance of Levon Esters and Neil Knobloch, program co-directors and faculty in the Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education, M@P fosters mentoring relationships between underrepresented minority and female graduate students and faculty or staff members in the College of Agriculture.

All the M@P team members have administrative duties in addition to mentoring incoming graduate students and each other peer to peer. M@P focuses on academic advising and more; mentors are also coaches, counselors, role models, and advocates.

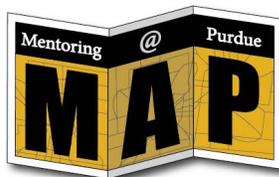
Two other members of M@P's leadership team are Quincy Clark, coordinator of research initiatives, and Torrie Cropps, educational outreach coordinator. Both are doctoral students in YDAE, and both bring a commitment to mentorship based on the influence of strong mentors in their own academic careers.

As a first-generation college student in her family, Cropps knows what it's like to navigate an unfamiliar educational system, and she values M@P's emphasis on culturally relevant mentoring. "Especially in ag-related STEM disciplines, advisors have good intentions but might not mentor underserved students effectively," she says.

Her mentor at North Carolina A&T State University "really helped mold me," she says. "When I got to Purdue, it was apparent that not all graduate students who are underrepresented in some fashion had the

opportunities that I've had. It's important for students to see what mentoring should look like. If they come here, they'll have someone in their corner. And if they go somewhere else, they'll know what to look for."

Clark, who completed her undergraduate degree at the University of San Francisco and master's at Purdue, cites the influence of her own first mentor: "Vice Chancellor Ron Coley helped me to increase my capacity and raise my standards," she says. "He expected excellence! When I met Dr. Esters, I knew I'd found my Ron Coley at Purdue."



M@P's intent is to improve the quality of graduate education. To that end, it sponsors a variety of on-campus events to help faculty and graduate students use mentoring as a strategy to navigate barriers

underrepresented minorities face in higher education. It also hosts a competitive Summer Scholars program that brings students from 1890 land-grant universities to the Purdue campus for three days of interactive workshops and culturally responsive activities. While some participants do apply to Purdue, the experience is more about building skills and confidence to pursue graduate study in general.

M@P also maintains a collection of resources on mentoring. In her role, Clark seeks out opportunities to publish about the program and track scholarship that team members generate for it.

Now, as she mentors others, she sees learning opportunities in every problem-solving experience. "If there's a problem that's unfamiliar to me, I'm going to do some research," she explains. "So now I've learned something in the process, and I've also helped someone. And they know they are to pay it forward; that's an unspoken rule."