

# Neuroscientist shares inclusivity lessons learned in mentor–mentee relationships

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Jose Rodriguez-Romaguera, PhD, assistant professor in the UNC Neuroscience Center at the UNC School of Medicine. Credit: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

Diversity is the driving factor for scientific discovery. However, racial diversification efforts among researchers have fallen short. In a

[perspective](#) published in *Neuron*, Jose Rodriguez-Romaguera, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UNC Neuroscience Center at the UNC School of Medicine, describes how critical mentor–mentee relationships are for the next generation of neuroscientists, especially for those, like him, who come from racially underrepresented groups.

In the piece, Rodriguez-Romaguera and his former mentor, Gregory Quirk, Ph.D., a supervising scientist at the University of the Philippines-Manila, formerly a professor at the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine, reflect on lessons learned from their cross-racial mentor–mentee relationship that could apply to many researchers today.

The perspective addresses boundaries of mentor–mentee relationships, lab environments that value caring and inclusivity, and strategies to overcome impostor syndrome.

"I did not perceive myself as a scientist prior to joining the Quirk Lab because most scientists did not look like me," said Rodriguez-Romaguera. "In fact, my own mentor did not look like me! However, my mentor, Greg, who 'looked' like a scientist telling me I could also "be a scientist" was a powerful motivator and started my journey to become a neuroscientist."

To create racially inclusive environments, this perspective acknowledges areas of focus and questions to address in order to be more effective in mentoring trainees from underrepresented and historically excluded backgrounds. Fostering a mentee's sense of belonging can ignite a [positive attitude](#) in academic pursuits leading to [career success](#).

Yet, the perspective explains how the imposter syndrome—one's [self-doubt](#) in intellect or skills—can make mentees feel incapable of belonging in the research realm. It is in this instance where Rodriguez-Romaguera urges mentors to allocate time to being accessible to help

trainees form their scientific identity.

"As a graduate student, I used to suffer from this type of impostor phenomenon until my mentor asked me, 'Do you prefer to fail, or would you rather succeed and leave your impostor identity behind?' While I was horrified that my mentor could think that I was failing on purpose, I realized that there were unconscious processes preventing me from succeeding in an environment where I thought I already belonged," said Rodriguez-Romaguera.

Acknowledging the mentee as the whole person with proper caring, understanding and boundaries is another recommendation for establishing a collaborative mentor–mentee relationship. Rodriguez-Romaguera states that personal issues and scientific issues can be successfully compartmentalized between a mentee and mentor.

Personal problems can affect a mentee's work professionally, and it's important for the mentor to recognize the challenges these can bring to both academic and nonacademic life. On the other hand, the piece stresses the importance of balancing boundaries between the mentor and mentee. Mentoring can lead to a friendship which poses the risk of hurting the purpose of the relationship, and it can spiral the mentee into establishing unnecessary dependence.

"My mentor, Greg, jolted me late one afternoon by saying, 'I may be friendly, but I'm not your friend, I'm your mentor,'" said Rodriguez-Romaguera. "While inconvenient to hear, this can allow the mentee to relax, knowing that the mentor will not lose sight of the mentee's professional needs. Establishing boundaries by both the mentor and the mentee are very important to mentoring scientists so the relationship maintains its focus on the science and the career progression of the trainee."

When it comes to focusing on productivity or focusing on a caring, personal tone, Rodriguez-Romaguera says both are necessary for the mentee. Additionally, he says trainees from underrepresented backgrounds may need more caring initially than non-underrepresented trainees because of the additional work needed to overcome racial stereotypes.

From the positive lab environment to participating in close-knit group activities, building cohesiveness between a [mentor](#) and mentee can strengthen career aspirations, especially as a mentee moves into postdoctoral training and eventually become mentors in their own labs.

**More information:** Jose Rodriguez-Romaguera and Gregory J. Quirk, Mentoring to propagate racial inclusivity in neuroscience, *Neuron* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.neuron.2024.08.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2024.08.004).  
[www.cell.com/neuron/fulltext/S0896-6273\(24\)00577-4](https://www.cell.com/neuron/fulltext/S0896-6273(24)00577-4)

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