



**SOUTH DAKOTA
STATE UNIVERSITY**
Alumni Mentor Program

**PROGRAM HANDBOOK
2025-2026 ACADEMIC YEAR**

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OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Program Description

The South Dakota State University Alumni & Foundation runs an alumni mentor program. Eligible students are matched with alumni who help them acquire the knowledge and skills for their next career steps. Mentor pairs meet monthly to complete activities that give students insight into starting and growing their careers.

Mission

The mission of the mentor program is to facilitate meaningful mentor relationships between experienced alumni and current SDSU students with a focus on academic, career, and professional development.

Goals

The South Dakota State University Alumni & Foundation's mission is to foster a spirit of loyalty and community among its alumni, students, and friends. Offering an alumni mentor program fulfills this mission while also accomplishing key goals, including:

- Enriching the academic experience of participating students
- Providing students with the chance to kickstart their professional careers
- Creating opportunities for alumni to engage with the University and be active members of the university experience
- Nurturing relationships between the Alumni & Foundation and the University

Benefits of an Alumni Mentor Program

Participating in an alumni mentor program can be a highly rewarding experience for students and alumni.

Students are given the chance to connect with industry leaders, tapping into a wealth of experience and knowledge that can't be replicated in the classroom. They gain key insight into industry trends, allowing them to adapt their academic experiences to improve their chances of achieving their professional goals.

Having a mentor allows students to begin building their professional network, which can open doors to future career opportunities.

Alumni who become mentors have a chance to help shape and guide the next generation of professionals and leaders. As mentors, they're building a legacy by bringing students along and helping them meet their potential, catapulting them into new professional heights.

Mentors also have a chance to become engaged members of the SDSU community again. Being an alumni mentor is a great way to continue creating fond memories as a Jackrabbit.

Eligibility Requirements

Students and alumni who wish to participate in the alumni mentor program must meet the following eligibility requirements to be considered for the program. *Meeting these requirements and applying to the program does not guarantee admission.*

Students

- Have earned 60 or more credit hours.
- Registered as a full-time SDSU student.
- Willing and able to dedicate a minimum of 1 hour per month to complete the suggested activities with their assigned mentor.
- Submit a high-resolution, professional photo. The photo should be only of yourself.

Alumni

- Graduate of South Dakota State University.
- Provide an updated resume.
- Currently employed or retired for less than 1 year.
- Willing and able to dedicate a minimum of 1 hour per month to complete the suggested activities with their assigned student mentee.
- Submit a high-resolution, professional photo. The photo should be only of yourself.

Matching Process

The matching process to pair students with alumni is one of the most important steps in creating a meaningful mentorship experience. During the application process, students will be asked to rank their matching preference based on *Career, Major, Geography, and Gender*. The Alumni & Foundation will make every effort to match students with alumni using their preference rankings. However, the final decision will be based on what is ultimately deemed to be in the best interest of each student participant. Submission of an application does not guarantee participation in the program or that every applicant will be matched with an alumni mentor. The Alumni & Foundation reserves the right to make exceptions to the application and matching process when a case can be made to step outside the standard course of action.

EXPECTATIONS

Respect, trust, commitment, and professionalism are all necessary virtues of a quality mentor program. As such, there are minimum expectations of all parties participating in the SDSU alumni mentor program.

- Matches are expected to meet a minimum of once per month. Meetings can be done in person, virtually, or over the phone. It is at the discretion of each pair to determine their best options.
- All participants are expected to be respectful and act professionally.
- Participants who join the program understand they are committing to participate for the entire academic year.
- Participants must complete the required surveys at the midpoint and end of the program. The results of the survey help identify best practices and opportunities for improvement for the program.
- The SDSU Alumni Mentor Program is not a job or internship placement program for students. There should be no expectations that a job or internship at the mentor's place of employment will develop out of this experience.

- You do NOT have to live in Brookings to participate in the program. Mentoring can be done in person and/or virtually.

Participants should view the professional relationship between student and mentor as a driver and navigator embarking on a journey. The student is the driver in this relationship. They steer and influence the direction that will be taken. The student identifies key milestones they would like to reach. They also determine the speed at which the relationship moves forward.

The mentor, as the navigator, will act as a guide. They will provide advice and help the student reach their desired milestones. The mentor will make the student aware of resources that are available and help them steer clear of pitfalls.

Finally, the Alumni & Foundation will act as the GPS. This role will provide structure and a roadmap to assist the student and mentor. It will ensure they know where support resources are located and reach their destination at the appropriate time.

Students

- All students seeking to join the program must read and sign the participation agreement (found on the application) before starting the program.
- Once the student is assigned a mentor, the student mentee should initiate the first contact with their mentor to introduce themselves.
- Schedule each meeting with the mentor. If possible, try to schedule meetings well in advance to ensure both parties are available. *Tip: Send a meeting calendar invite to ensure the agreed-upon time is blocked off on both calendars.*
- Maintain regular monthly contact with the mentor and be responsive to all communications.
- Mentees are expected to lead each interaction with their mentor. They should come prepared to each meeting knowing what will be covered and ready to ask questions and participate in assigned activities.
- Be open to receiving feedback. One of the benefits of a mentor is having someone who is invested in the success of the mentee. Ask clarifying questions if necessary.
- Mentees should make every effort to honor their commitments. This includes attending meetings, maintaining prompt communication, completing tasks, and submitting the two program surveys.

Alumni Mentors

- All alumni seeking to join the program must read and sign the participation agreement (found on the application) before starting the program.
- The mentor must be willing to hold the assigned student mentee accountable to the goals they set for themselves.
- Direct mentee to appropriate resources made available by the University when necessary (Career Development, etc.) The Office of Career Development offers a wealth of resources, including resume writing, access to internships, interview preparation guidance, and much more. Check out their website and find more information [here](#).
- Provide thoughtful and constructive feedback with the intent of helping the mentee grow and reach their potential.

- Maintain regular monthly contact with and be responsive to all communications. The mentee is responsible for initiating contact, but the mentor should make every effort to keep the communication lines open.
- The mentor should make every effort to honor their commitments. This includes attending meetings, maintaining prompt communication, completing tasks, and submitting the two program surveys.

Alumni & Foundation

- The Alumni & Foundation and its representatives will make every effort to accommodate each student's matching preference indicated on their application.
- We will respond to communications promptly.
- We will do outreach to each pair throughout the year to ensure a quality experience for all participants. We will make support resources available to pairs when possible.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Suggested Activities

The alumni mentor program has a list of suggested activities that mentor pairs should complete by the end of the program. It is the responsibility of the student to track progress and ensure each activity is completed. Mentor pairs are encouraged to use the Mentor Program Activity Tracker to identify assigned activities and track their progress.

***Each mentor/mentee pair is encouraged to customize The Mentor Program Activity Tracker and activities to meet the needs of the mentee. The Activity Tracker and program activities are simply a guide to creating a fruitful experience in the program. The circumstances and needs of each mentee are different, and the program is designed to be flexible and accommodating to those needs.**

The suggested activities of the program (found on the Mentor Program Activity Tracker) include, but are not limited to:

- **Complete an Introduction Meeting**, which includes a review of each participant's current situation (school, work, etc.), a review of the Program Handbook and Mentor Program Activity Tracker, and schedule future meetings. **Tip: Come to the meeting with a list of open-ended questions.**
- Map out the student's career goals using the **Career Goals Worksheet**.
- Conduct a **Student SWOT Analysis** to identify strengths and skills and areas for improvement.
- **Review Resumes and LinkedIn Accounts** and locate additional support resources. A first version of the resume should be completed and available for review before the meeting.
- **Attend a Networking Event** together OR **Conduct a Job Shadow**. **Tip: There are several networking opportunities available virtually if you are unable to attend in person.**
- **Conduct a Mock Interview** using the resources made available through the [SDSU Office of Career Development](#).

Student mentees are expected to submit the completed Program Activity Tracker to the Alumni & Foundation at the end of the program before receiving their Certificate of Completion.

Optional Activities

Pairs are encouraged to complete additional activities besides the minimum requirements. Some optional activities include, but are not limited to:

- **Attend a social event and/or SDSU event together.** Check out the [SDSU Event Calendar](#) for available options.
- Explore some of these **challenging discussion topics:**
 - How to get noticed for your contributions at work
 - How to navigate salary negotiations/pay raises
 - Current issues in the profession
 - Managing work/life balance
 - Approaches to ethical dilemmas in the workplace
- **Walk through a project** the mentor was involved in designing/building/presenting at work. Be sure to share timelines, best practices, lessons learned, etc.
- Have the mentor **join the student for a day of classes** on campus
- **Participate in a volunteer project** together
- **Invite your student to a social activity** where other professionals or clients are involved

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE

- **Conduct engaging conversations** through inquisitive questions:
 - How do you handle obstacles, roadblocks, and setbacks?
 - Who was most impactful in your life?
 - Which courses do you wish you had taken at SDSU?
 - If you could start over again in launching your career, what steps would you take?
 - What are the most satisfying and the most frustrating parts of your work?
 - What professional goals have you accomplished, and how have your professional goals evolved?
- **Give honest feedback.** The best relationships are built on trust, and providing open, honest feedback helps in establishing trust.
- **Be a good listener.**
 - Showing interest in what the other person is saying
 - Ask clarifying questions
 - Avoid distractions
 - Be willing to accept feedback

Tip: Be free of distractions. If meeting in person, do so in a public but quiet setting (for example – a coffee shop in the afternoon). If meeting virtually, close all windows on your computer and put your phone away.

- **Coordinate calendars.** Finding a good time to connect can be one of the biggest challenges for mentor pairs. Here are some best practices to ease the process.
 - If possible, schedule meetings to be at reoccurring times. For example, on the 2nd Tuesday of every month at 4 p.m.

- When a schedule conflict pops up, communicate as soon as possible. In the communication, offer a few alternate times that work for your schedule.
- Be flexible. Participating in the alumni mentor program is an acknowledgment of a commitment by both parties. There may be times when pairs meet over a lunch break, in the evening, or even over the weekend.

Besides the best practices listed above, below are additional best practices specific to each participant.

Students

- **Be prepared.** The time the student mentee has with their mentor is limited, so mentees need to come prepared to make each meeting productive and meaningful.
Tip: Look at the suggested activity in advance to be prepared.
- **Set realistic expectations** right away. The mentor can be more supportive if they have a better understanding of the needs of the student mentee. If the mentee is interested in learning more about a particular area of their career or industry, they should openly share that with the mentor.
- **Respect your mentor's time.** Remember that the mentor is volunteering their time for the mentee. The student needs to be on time for all meetings and never no-show them. If there is a need to reschedule a meeting, always notify the mentor with as much advanced notice as possible and offer a couple of alternate times. This will make rescheduling faster.

Alumni Mentors

- **Be willing to give more time when possible.** We know the mentor's time is precious, and we are all grateful the mentor is willing to share it with the student. Whenever possible, mentors should be open to sharing more time with the mentee. Even if that means a simple phone call, text message, or email throughout the week, these small investments of time pay large dividends in the lives of each student.
Tip: Consider a shared mentor calendar that both parties can view and edit. Each can block off time when they are busy and available.
- **It's okay to say, "I don't know".** Mentors are not expected to be experts in everything. There will be times when the mentor doesn't have the answer to a problem. The mentor should work together with the mentee and demonstrate the value of being resourceful.
- **Share your professional experiences.** Mentors tend to only share their positive experiences with their mentees. The best lessons often come from mistakes. Be open and honest with the student mentee. No one expects the mentor to be the perfect model professional, and we need to help each student learn this lesson.

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