

UF AIAA Mentorship Program

Alena Golda¹ and Jose Aguilar²

*University of Florida Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering,
Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Department,
Gainesville, Florida, 32611, USA*

I. Summary

It is your first semester away from home at the University of Florida (UF). You find yourself in a new city, living on your own for the first time, and at a university with 60,000 unfamiliar faces. While starting college is exciting, empowering, invigorating and a virtue in life, many students also feel an urge to find a sense of belonging and move past the feelings of uncertainty and nervousness. Therefore, with the support of the mechanical and aerospace engineering department at UF, the UF AIAA mentorship program was created to help guide students along their collegiate experiences.

At its foundation, the UF AIAA mentorship program pairs together an undergraduate or graduate upperclassman mentor and an undergraduate underclassman mentee. This program creates pairings for members that are mutually beneficial where the mentor imparts knowledge, expertise, and wisdom to a mentee. A mentor in our program is also expected to be someone who can be a peer advisor for coursework, has experience with student leadership, internships, design teams, research, jobs, and has excelled academically. However, no mentor has been denied a position among the groups we bring in, because every student has their own unique journey to pass down knowledge from. One of the most important parts of our program are the mentees. A mentee is generally someone who is advised, trained, or counseled by a mentor. Within AIAA's Mentorship Program in Fall 2020, our mentees were students who had never formed any sort of meaningful connection with their peers or the department's faculty members. They were students who had been isolated for months and had come to a new city far away from home only to join approximately 25 Zoom calls a week. In an effort to give students the opportunity to experience something alike to what a "normal" collegiate experience would be, AIAA at UF adapted the mentorship program into something students would enjoy and grow from.

To start of the semester, planning meetings were set between the Mentorship Program Director and the Student Branch President to establish goals, program timeline, supporting events, and applications. Application questions were formed that gauged who the mentors and mentees were beyond their engineering degree, which allowed the board to establish intentional pairings that quickly formed meaningful bonds. One of our signature events, Faculty Insights, were offered as an opportunity for students to connect with our MAE faculty in a casual, informal setting. Students learned about the professor's life experiences, what made them choose to become an educator, future goals, and asked them for advice on career paths.

Starting off the Spring 2021 semester, the program expanded its lineup of events, collaborations, and benefits that the program can provide students. To start off, a recruitment video was created and sent to professors, class group chats, and the departments emailing listserv. Next, collaboration began with Sigma Gamma Tau (aerospace engineering honor society) to try to reach more academically achieving students. These efforts resulted in nearly doubling the number of students involved with the mentorship program from last semester. Within the lineup of events, we will be hosting one of the UF MAE alumni students who is now a student advisor. This event will bring in more knowledge of sound advice to give to students from the perspective of a student advisor while still sharing the unique experience this MAE alumni has had.

Our mentorship program opens our events to all students to not prohibit anyone from learning and growing more in their paths as aerospace engineers. The program is a great way to build leadership experience and offer help to mentees who face the same hardships that the student mentors once tackled. Students find themselves with a new sense of belonging along with direction and motivation to guide them to success within AIAA and aerospace engineering at UF.

¹ Undergraduate Student, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Department, AIAA Student Member

² Undergraduate Student, Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Department, AIAA Student Member