



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Solar Decathlon

Building the
Next Generation

U.S. Department of Energy Solar Decathlon® Mentor Program Guide

Overview

The U.S. Department of Energy Solar Decathlon® Mentor Program pairs Solar Decathlon alumni with student teams participating in the Design Challenge. The Mentor Program enables additional support and guidance for student teams and lowers the barrier to entry for competing. Solar Decathlon alumni from any competition year may become mentors. All teams are welcome to apply for a mentor.

Solar Decathlon Design Challenge Competition

Mentors should consider the scope and timeline of the Design Challenge before making commitments to a student team. The Design Challenge is an annual, design-only competition where student teams create a zero energy design for a residential or commercial building over the course of one or two semesters. The competition cycle is October to April each year. Design Challenge students attend the Competition Event each April, held both virtually and in person at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL).

Mentor Commitment

- Mentors provide up to 15 hours of support throughout the Design Challenge competition.
 - Support may include technical or nontechnical review and feedback on project direction, deliverables, and presentations. The organizers encourage mentors to share their experience and advice from previous competitions, including lessons learned.
- Mentors cannot complete any project work for the team.
- Mentors will work with only one student team.
 - Mentors who apply to be paired with a Design Challenge team are expected to be a resource for the competition period from October to April.

Student Team Commitment

- Students lead the relationship with their mentor by scheduling meetings, providing meeting agendas, and completing follow-up tasks.
- Students keep their mentor apprised of project progress and outcomes.
- Students provide their mentor with adequate lead time for reviews—no less than one week.
- Students critically consider mentor feedback to determine how best to incorporate.



Mentor Program Best Practices

These best practices are provided to help student teams and mentors navigate a successful relationship.

Student Tips

- Set up recurring meetings to connect with your mentor and establish routine check-ins that align with competition deliverables. Consolidate questions for your mentor to guide conversations.
- Ask mentors about their background and strengths to understand how to utilize their expertise.
 - How can their experience help inform your project's direction?
 - In what knowledge areas do they consider themselves an expert?
- The organizers recommend designating one student as the main point of contact for your mentor.

Mentor Tips

- Share tips, lessons learned, and wisdom from your past Solar Decathlon experience.
 - What do you wish you knew as a student competitor? What went well? What could have been improved?
 - How did you divide responsibilities within your team?
How did your team engage with industry?
 - How did you maximize your experience at the Competition Event?
 - How did you present a compelling story about your project to jurors?
- Familiarize yourself with the official Competition Rules, including deliverable requirements.
- Set clear expectations around your time commitment and communication style with students.

"I had an amazing experience! As a recent Solar Decathlon competitor, it was really nice to stay connected to the competition and be able to share my experience and knowledge with the team... It enabled me to meet new people and learn from them as well!"

– Former alumni mentor