Nominee: Dr. Stephanie Danette Preston

Scholar: Cierra Chandler

Institution: Penn State University

Dear Mentor of the Year Award Committee,

It is with great enthusiasm and a full heart that I nominate Dr. Stephanie Danette Preston for the Mentor of the Year Award. Dr. Preston exemplifies what it means to be an advocate for her community, consistently going above and beyond for her students and staff. She is not only a champion for our advancement but also someone who takes action—putting her energy, time, and resources where her words are.

I first met Dr. Preston in the fall of 2019 at a Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) meeting. From the very beginning, she made an impression—stern yet warm, like a favorite aunt. She was resolute in explaining the mission of BGSA, why she was there, and how she would be available to students. She made it clear that she would always be in our corner, encouraging us to reach out if we ever faced challenges. It became evident that she was the person to turn to with any issues, especially in navigating the unique challenges of being black at a predominantly white institution.

Our interactions deepened after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. During that difficult time, it was especially isolating to be a black student at Penn State, where neither my department, college nor university made efforts to address the unrest or provide support for students of color. I recall discussing this with my BGSA-assigned mentor, after which Dr. Preston reached out to share resources, offer support, and assured me. Her reassurance and unwavering presence gave me solace during a time when it felt like we didn’t matter or weren’t seen at this institution. Dr. Preston inspired me to continue my advocacy and push forward with my work, and I’m forever grateful for her guidance.

Dr. Preston tirelessly works to help students in every way imaginable, whether it’s securing housing, funding, or health insurance for graduate and undergraduate students alike. I distinctly remember her helping an international student who arrived to dilapidated, pest-infested housing. Dr. Preston worked after hours to help that student find a better living situation. In another instance, she intervened when a student suddenly lost their funding at the beginning of their first semester, personally contacting the Dean of the college to secure funding for that student’s entire Ph.D. journey. These are just a few of many examples of how she helps us navigate the complexities of this university, often doing work outside of her formal responsibilities.

On top of these efforts, Dr. Preston was appointed as the interim director of the Paul Robeson Cultural Center while continuing to serve as the Associate Dean of Educational Equity and Director of the Office of Graduate Educational Equity Programs. Despite wearing many hats, she remains accessible and dedicated to her students. When the university decreased budgets and restructured, she ensured that key programming special to students, including a graduate student wellness book club, celebratory graduate gala, and welcome barbeque, were not impacted. She is a living testament to doing more with less, continually providing support even when resources are limited.

Personally, Dr. Preston has been instrumental in my growth as a leader. She has been my confidant, advisor, and mentor, guiding me through my leadership roles in the Multicultural Engineering Graduate Association, the Graduate and Professional Student Association, and the University Park Fee Board. Her wisdom has helped me develop the skills I need to navigate challenges and hone my leadership abilities, all while reminding me of my primary goal: to complete my Ph.D. in materials science and engineering. Dr. Preston’s grounded, sobering advice keeps me focused on my academic journey even as I balance multiple responsibilities.

Dr. Preston’s helped me navigate the challenges of my advisor leaving the university in my final year, reassuring me that I would still graduate on time and ensured that I would have secure funding in the process. I cannot overstate how much she has contributed to my success at Penn State. The support system she has helped me curate has been crucial to me during my toughest moments in the Ph.D. program.

I want to emphasize that Dr. Preston’s commitment is has not been limited to her official responsibilities. She selflessly offers her time and personal resources to ensure her students are okay, no matter how busy she is. I know I am just one of hundreds, if not thousands, of students whose lives and careers she has significantly impacted.

It is with the deepest appreciation and admiration that I nominate Dr. Stephanie Danette Preston for the Mentor of the Year Award. She gives her all to her students—even when it seems she has nothing left to give—and she never hesitates to fight for our well-being. She is a mentor in the truest sense, and Penn State is incredibly fortunate to have her.

Sincerely,
Cierra Chandler