A little over a year into his position as a Graduate Research Associate at Ohio State University, Donald Gillis was pushed into a mentoring role: He was asked to guide three students from the University of Puerto Rico through a ten-week summer research experience.

"My advisor put me in that position because he was confident in my abilities to go through with it," says Gillis. "He wanted me to show myself that I was perfectly capable of mentoring those students." And he was – through the ten-week program, Gillis was not only able to help the students understand the processes of research and experimentation, he also built personal relationships and friendships that allowed him to connect with them more productively on a professional level.

New to the role of a mentor, Gillis didn't think he'd be as good at it as he was. He attributes part of his success to his own advisor. "He's really good at adapting his teaching style to fit the different learning styles of his students," says Gillis, citing the not-uncommon lab occurrence of his advisor describing what he wanted done to his auditory learners, then moving to his visual learners with a notepad and delivering his assignments in a completely different way. "He made sure everyone understood what they needed to do," Gillis recalls.

But it wasn't just Gillis' ability to adapt his mentoring style to reflect his mentees' needs. Another contributing factor to the successful experience was the age similarity between himself and his mentees: there were no more than two years between all of them. "I felt like I understood them more, and like I could relate to them more on that level."

And relate to them he did, on that level and more. "We were all minorities in that situation, at Ohio State, in that program. It was easier for us to get together and develop those relationships." It helped, according to Gillis, that there were not too many distractions in the town of Wooster, where the summer research program took place. Due to the isolation of the town, Gillis was able to be more involved. He took his students out to dinner, or invited them over to his house. "If you're going to be effective as a mentor or work with anyone on a team," he says, "you have to know them at a more personal level."

Which is exactly what Gillis decided to do – and it paid off. While trying to explain a particularly difficult concept, Gillis recalls, he took the information and likened it to a videogame that he knew his students enjoyed playing. This common ground got the idea across in a much smoother, more applicable manner than the textbook definition he had been attempting. "I took information and presented it in a different way, that they were more familiar with and more comfortable with," Gillis says. "I was only able to do that because I had developed that personal relationship with them."

"I love science, and I love what I do," says Gillis, "and I was so excited and so ready to share that passion and that love that I have for science with someone else. That

determination and drive that I have in myself was the main cause of success, because I was able to instill that in my students. And one thing that I found surprising was that I actually liked to teach. Actually being in that position made me fall in love with the idea of being an educator."