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## Mentoring Black Teens during National Pandemics: Mutually Beneficial Service

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# Mentoring Black Teens during National Pandemics: Mutually Beneficial Service

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# MENTORING BLACK TEENS DURING NATIONAL PANDEMICS:

Mutually Beneficial Service

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Terrell Glenn (*Mechanical Engineering*), Rachel Scarlett (*Agricultural and  
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## STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

**Temitope (Temi) F. Adeoye** is a PhD candidate and Ross Fellow in Educational Psychology at Purdue University. Her research experiences focus on examining the quality of student motivation, student engagement, collaborative groupwork, and disciplinary belonging. Upon completion of her doctoral program, Temi aims to obtain a tenure track faculty appointment with a joint administrative appointment in academic affairs. Ultimately, she aims to gain an appointment at a historically black college or university. Temi has served as Site Director of the Heads Up Tutoring & Life Skills Program and founded the Teen Mentoring Program in 2019. In this article, Temi reflects on how she transformed the distress of 2020 into purposeful service with Black youth.

**Myson Burch** is a PhD student and NSF Graduate Fellow at Purdue University studying Computer Science. He is currently working on machine learning methods using genetics data to draw inferences about ancestry and diseases. Myson's career goal is to become a research scientist in an industry setting. Myson has volunteered as a mentor with the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program since 2019. In this article, Myson reflects on how he managed mentoring during unprecedented times.

**Terrell Glenn** is a PhD candidate in the School of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University as a National GEM Consortium Fellow, George Washington Carver Fellow, and an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program Award winner. Terrell is also actively involved in the community, leading workshops in Toy Design and Smart Toys & Robots for the Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute at Purdue (2017–2019), leading a virtual workshop with an Introduction to Physical Computing, starting the Indianapolis STEAM Fair for underrepresented minority students, and serving as a mentor in several youth mentoring programs in Indianapolis and Lafayette. Terrell plans to graduate with his PhD in 2021. Terrell has volunteered as a mentor with the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program for over two years. In this article, Terrell reflects on leadership development and protective factors in Black youth.

**Rachel Scarlett** is an environmental scientist, mentor, and teacher. She holds a bachelor of science degree in Environmental Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara and a master of science in Agricultural and Biological Engineering from Purdue University. She is currently a PhD candidate in Agricultural and Biological Engineering at Purdue University and a 2020 Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellow. As an interdisciplinary scholar, she strives to think beyond disciplinary silos. She considers human communities and Earth's ecosystems to be intricately entangled and co-dependent on each other.

Further, she strives to envision STEM fields as critical to knowledge production on socioenvironmental justice. Rachel has volunteered as a tutor for three years and as a mentor with the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program for over two years. In this article, Rachel reflects on reciprocity and care in mentoring relationships.

**De'Shovon M. Shenault** is a PhD candidate in the Analytical Chemistry Department at Purdue University. She holds a dual BS degree in both Environmental Chemistry from Illinois State University and Chemistry from Chicago State University. Her current research develops mass spectrometry methods that utilize gas-phase ion/ion reaction for the structural elucidation of lipids found in biological and other biomolecule samples. In her current graduate career, she has co-authored three publications in mass spectrometry journals. She has volunteered as a tutor for approximately three years and as a mentor with the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program for over two years. In this article, De'Shovon reflects on how she has helped to extend teens' familial communities through mentorship.

Black youth face systemic educational and social barriers that impede their development and achievement. Given the competing demands for parental involvement in youth development, research shows that mentoring provides youth access to adults capable of helping them tackle these barriers and use their cultural strengths as an asset. Specifically, we utilize Black culture as a tool to connect with teen mentees and impart positive examples of how cultural knowledge and experiences can be an asset in achieving their success (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Pairing teens with college-aged adults is a mutually beneficial opportunity. Teens' academic, social, and emotional well-being benefit from having mentors who are proximal in age (Holmes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2017). College-aged students benefit from the rare opportunity to engage in long-term service to local communities. Additionally, teen mentees can benefit from these experiences through a sense of improved access to college admissions, life, and other academic resources (Martinez et al., 2017).

The Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program was begun in September 2019 to provide local Black teens access to Black role models committed to helping them achieve their goals. We are graduate students who serve as mentors to the teens in this program. We collectively hold more than five years of experience directing mentoring programs and have been involved in formal and informal mentorship since middle and high school. Our experience ranges from serving as mentees in youth programs to offering tutoring and life skill-based mentoring to peers and youth during college and graduate school. From our previous experiences, we have developed an archive of resources, skills, and knowledge that have prepared us to support our teens. Our motivations vary and can be attributed to a lack of mentorship growing up, a responsibility to pay forward the mentorship we previously received, and other factors, but we all share a passion for serving Black youth. The opportunity to engage in multiyear mentorship with the same teen(s) allows us to achieve our motivation of lifting the next

generation of Black leaders as we strive to achieve the same goal ourselves.

## DESCRIPTION

The Heads Up Tutoring & Life Skills Program is an afterschool program begun in 2013 by local organizer Pauline Shen. Heads Up recruits college and community volunteers to offer weekly homework help and social development for Lafayette youth in grades K–12. Heads Up serves youth living in government-assisted housing complexes in east Lafayette. What makes Heads Up programming unique is being located in a clubhouse in the neighborhood where our youth live. Thus, Heads Up addresses two needs within the community: offering access to after-school homework help and eliminating the challenge of transportation to such an offering. Our former location closed due to COVID-19 guidelines, so we have shifted to an outdoor and online format. Although participation has dropped with this shift, Heads Up helps approximately five youth complete their homework and practice academic skills on a weekly basis.

Within this larger initiative is the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program, which pairs Lafayette teenagers with college students invested in supporting their growth. Teens meet monthly with their mentor to engage in an activity of the teen's choice. Teens are impacted through scaffolded goal setting for their academic and personal growth. The Teen Mentoring Program currently serves five Lafayette teens and mentors include five Purdue graduate students. (See Figure 1 for our logos.)



Figure 1. Heads Up logos.

**COMMUNITY IMPACT**

As mentors, we were trained on how to fulfill program expectations and meet monthly to problem-solve and plan our programming. Given the breadth of expertise among the mentors, we are able to address different facets of personal and professional development for our mentees. Recognizing a change in teens’ needs beginning in 2020, we extended our mentoring approach from using academic metrics to encompassing a more holistic system to guide their development. In addition to academics, we also support teens’ self-set personal, social, and financial goals. Working with teens to set their own goals has supported a student-focused mentoring experience and encouraged mentees’ accountability to their own standards for development.

Since this was the first time most teens had engaged in a formal mentoring program, we developed a mentee orientation to familiarize them with the aims of the program. Further, we welcome constant feedback on how we can improve the program to best facilitate teens’ participation. For example, in response to COVID-19, we created a space for group messaging to encourage weekly participation and connection. As some of our teens travel and move outside of the apartment complexes we originally served, having opportunities to communicate and participate virtually has positively impacted their continued involvement. Additionally, virtual communication allowed us to offer longevity and more consistent interaction that is beneficial for mentoring outcomes (Agyemang & Haggerty, 2020; Dubois et al., 2002). Further, participating in the teen mentoring program provides teens an opportunity to extend their strong, existing community to include the other teens and adult mentors in the program that they may not have originally pursued.

**STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT**

In the following section, we each reflect on the impact our involvement has had on our personal and professional development. We each take a specific focus on the intersection of our service with the COVID-19 and long-standing police brutality pandemics.

**Transforming Distressed Experiences into Purposeful Service—*Temitope F. Adeoye***

I serve as site director for the Heads Up Tutoring & Life Skills Program and coordinator of the Teen Mentoring Program. The COVID-19 and long-standing police brutality pandemics have challenged me in all

the roles I perform. As a Black graduate student working in predominantly White spaces, I felt particularly isolated when Purdue discontinued in-person engagements. This feeling of isolation, ironically, persisted despite the endless number of Purdue and international events I gained access to as programming shifted online. As I reflected on how I could feel so isolated despite being more connected than ever, I realized it was because the spaces I occupied most were not talking about the traumas that debilitated my daily activities. As I reflected on why the leaders in the spaces I occupy were not acknowledging the murders of Black people at the hands of those sworn to protect them, I realized the teens in our program may feel the same way, as our own mentoring program had yet to address this pandemic. Despite having yet to sort out our own feelings about COVID-19 and long-standing police brutality pandemics, we decided to partner with The Collective of the Younger Women’s Task Force of Greater Lafayette to host a virtual healing circle for teens with a licensed psychologist in the summer of 2020 (Figure 2). Mentors also began intentionally checking in with our teens about how they are managing the shelter-in-place order and continued murders of Black people. We emphasized how okay it was to not be okay, to not be performing at their optimal levels, and to be frustrated with the current state of our nation. As I did this to comfort our teens during a stressful 2020, I found extending myself the same affirmations and kindness was comforting as well.

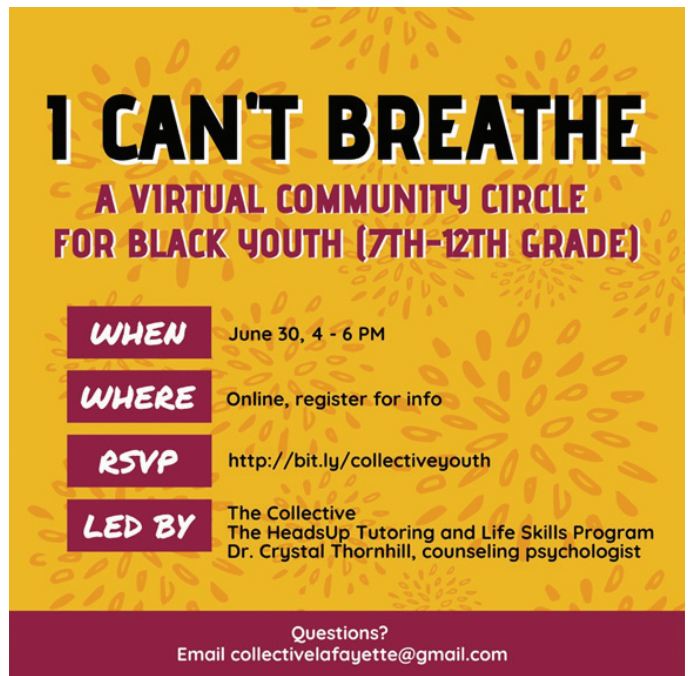


Figure 2. Flyer for healing circle event.



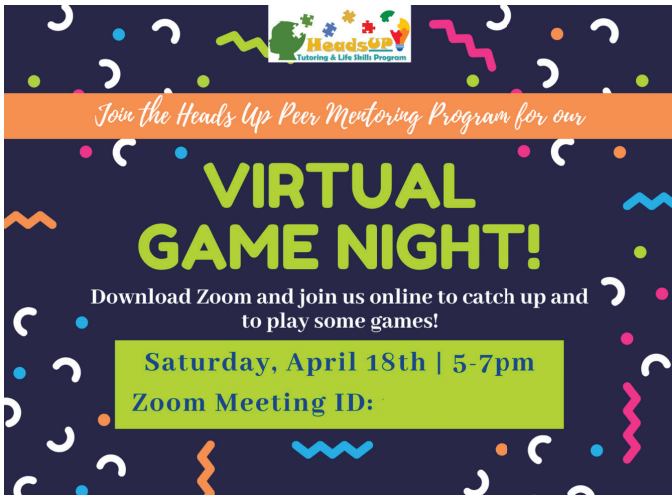


Figure 3. Flyer for virtual game night.

In addition to creating spaces for healing, we also worked to develop alternative forms of communication and engagement. Previously we would take our teens out for meals and meet monthly as a large group to go skating or have a family-style dinner. By April 2020, we shifted to completely virtual programming. Zoom game nights (Figure 3), Netflix watch parties, and virtual escape rooms became our new “outings.” As fun as those events were for teens, I know they equally came for the meal delivery we offered to replace our family-style dinners. Though I miss the impromptu holiday karaoke, I enjoy how we have been able to maintain virtual engagement with our teens while continuing to support their progress toward achieving their goals.

The largest challenge faced as we transitioned online has been maintaining contact with teens between our monthly events. We now use a group messaging platform to host weekly competitions to keep teens and mentors engaged as a group (Figure 4). Our weekly What’s Up Wednesdays competition invites us all to share a picture or reflect on a prompt to keep us all updated on what’s up in our lives (Figure 5). Although we still struggle to keep all our teens engaged in every event with all the other responsibilities teens have, I am satisfied with how we have kept their attention, engagement, and growth. Despite the distress I experienced attempting to navigate the chaos of 2020, collaborating with the other mentors to engage in purposeful service with local teens has been an invaluable opportunity.

**Managing Mentorship in Unprecedented Times—Myson Burch**

My service as a mentor and role model in the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program has provided me with many



Figure 4. Screenshot of What’s Up Wednesdays competition in group messaging app.

challenges and more opportunities for growth as we navigate the obstacles brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic. One challenge I have been able to improve upon has been my ability to communicate in a remote setting. Although developing relationships and creating safe spaces for open dialogue is difficult under normal circumstances, doing so in a virtual environment



Figure 5. Flyer for virtual What's Up Wednesdays competition.group messaging app.

is even more challenging. As a program, we have continued to engage with our teens virtually and encourage our teens to stay connected with their mentors during this time. My virtual conversations with my mentee have been very casual and unstructured to allow for a safe and stress-free environment.

I have also been challenged to find innovative ways to keep our teens engaged in fun activities while still building life skills. Although virtual communications can be more convenient, it has become very exhausting during the pandemic where it is the primary mode of communication and education for our teens. Because of this, we needed to find creative ways to engage virtually while also not burning out our teens. This was particularly challenging because a lot of my ideas with engagement were based on going out and doing activities. I started mentoring at the end of 2019 and the pandemic began shortly after that, so I needed to shift gears to be a successful mentor. Our program has taken advantage of various social media platforms as well as other platforms of communication to create unique engagement activities. We have hosted many virtual game nights, deployed weekly challenges on social media, and even attended virtual escape rooms, which have been a fun and engaging activity. To continue to

build life skills, we hosted virtual healing sessions for our teens to address a bevy of personal and social issues with a licensed psychologist as a form of mental decompression. Finally, we have monthly check-ins between our mentors and teens that serve as another way to stay engaged. We have adapted to the current circumstances in safe, virtual ways for our teens while still providing all the resources that we do as a program.

The final aspect has been the reevaluation of my academic, professional, and personal goals. One objective of our program is to help our teens prepare for life after high school. We have emphasized that more this past year because it is easy to lose sight of goals and lose motivation for accomplishing goals during challenging times. We have hosted various one-on-one sessions with our teens discussing their academic, professional, and personal goals and what steps they can take to achieve them. Having these discussions with my mentee has made me assess the same for myself. I enjoyed these conversations with my mentee because it became a mode of accountability for both of us, making sure we were staying on track toward our goals. It is quite ironic being mentored by my mentee, but it has helped build our relationship and these sessions have been some of my favorite conversations with my mentee this year.

### Leadership Development and Protective Factors in Black Teens—*Terrell Glenn*

My personal mission as a mentor is to empower our teens with the tools that they need to feel confident, develop leadership skills, and be successful in their endeavors. Throughout the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, I have remained steadfast in my mission, grounded by the enthusiastic organizations that I work with. This is especially true with the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program as the other mentors and I have continued to engage our students with dynamic programming, informative virtual discussions, and creative ways to get our teens to think (and have fun simultaneously).

One major challenge that I have faced since this pandemic started was engaging students in meaningful ways. As a mentor to one of the Black boys in the program, my aim is to build rapport with my mentee through fun activities, life discussions, and the various workshops put on by the program. Since social relationships are essential for the leadership learning of Black boys (Teasley et al., 2007), providing opportunities for Black boys to engage in positive relationships with others, such as through mentoring, is a valuable development opportunity. These relationships can be peer-to-peer and with role models or mentors. Developing these relationships was not an easy task during the COVID-19 pandemic given the social distancing guidelines. However, through our monthly check-ins via Zoom, our relationship has grown stronger given his willingness to be open with me about some of his academic and personal challenges. Moreover, although the COVID-19 pandemic has created barriers to our existing communication and engagement channels, we have found ways to still cultivate these relationships with our teens in meaningful ways.

Despite the global health pandemic of COVID-19, Black lives continue to be at risk for socially unjust actions. Discussing these matters with Black teens is important because they tend to perceive more racially discriminatory incidents from others, which can lead to depressive episodes, low self-esteem, and life dissatisfaction (Seaton, 2009). These experiences can be mitigated by implementing protective factors during our activities (e.g., increased community support, self-efficacy, and social connection). Our teens tend to internalize their academic performance, making it difficult for them to evaluate their self-worth as separate from their grades. For our teens who are dissatisfied with their grades, a possible explanation for their resulting lowered self-esteem can be discriminatory incidents that they may

encounter on a daily basis—whether it is at school, work, or in their community. To counteract these adverse experiences, I found that providing positive reinforcement to their achievements works well, in addition to the monthly check-ins and various group activities.

Despite my positive experiences as a mentor, it does not come without some challenges. Our teens sometimes become distant; weekly discussions tend to be short, and for most of us our in-depth conversations with teens happen during the monthly meetings when we have our one-on-one time. I attribute this to our teens' busy lives as school and/or work tend to consume their time and energy. Additionally, coordinating our schedules has been a challenge. It was my hope that having the flexibility of meeting virtually would ease the challenges of building rapport. Unfortunately, with so many of their former spaces of engagement switching to virtual formats, our teens are Zoomed and video conferenced out. Our inclusion of weekly competitions via group messaging has helped provide quick, video-free opportunities for teens and mentors to engage in and win prizes for doing so. Overall, my experiences as a mentor have helped broaden my perspective on providing service to Black teens.

### Reciprocity and Care in Mentoring Relationships—*Rachel Scarlett*

The COVID-19 and long-standing police brutality pandemics have caused unprecedented and disproportionate harm to Black communities. Our teens are experiencing social isolation, rapid transformations to e-learning, increased financial burdens, and the persistent dehumanization and criminalization that comes with being Black in America. Mentoring during these pandemics has challenged me to develop new models of caring and reciprocal relationships that encourage our teens to thrive.

One challenge that I have faced during the pandemics is a strain on communication with our teens. Like the rest of us, teens are losing their sense of control, which likely contributes to self-isolation. In response to this challenge, we encourage our teens to lead the mentoring relationship and promote reciprocity. Every year, our teens set self-defined goals to plan for their future. In 2020, we expanded our focus from mainly academic goals to a four-pronged approach including social, personal, financial, and academic goals. I meet with my mentee monthly to discuss their progress on goals, but I have found that most of our conversations are on anime, food, our moms, and day-to-day life. Eventually, we get to the goals, but I have become more flexible in my expectations and encourage my mentee to drive the



conversations. Most of the time, I notice my mentee's growth concerning their goals through these informal conversations. Giving our teens more opportunities to drive the mentoring relationship allows me to listen to and address their needs.

Another challenge that I have faced is finding safe spaces to decompress and process the mental and emotional trauma of living in a constant state of racial violence. Given limited access to affordable and culturally competent mental health care in the United States, these safe spaces can provide a critical service. In 2020, we hosted virtual healing sessions for local Black teens. These healing sessions started as a pop-up crisis response but have evolved into more frequent conversations about racial trauma. The objective is to give our teens a space to name their emotions, find support and care in collective healing, and become equipped with coping mechanisms. I have learned that our teens are fully aware of racial trauma, but discussions on this topic are often limited to the home; they do not have spaces to heal and discuss this with peers. Our conversations about racism have sparked heated debates on the ethical response to racism and police brutality, and we are still working toward creating spaces where our teens feel safe to be emotionally vulnerable. As caring for our mental and emotional health is taboo in the Black community (especially in communal settings), I believe our teens need time to feel safe enough to express themselves emotionally. Our long-term mentoring model will help us to develop safe communal spaces where our emotional vulnerability is a strength and a path toward healing racial trauma.

The community we have built with our teens has certainly become a safe space for me. My mother passed away in January 2021. Our teens and mentors were a great source of support for me. They shared a playlist of their "go-to" healing songs, which brought me solace in my toughest moments. We have created a community that shows up for each other, and I cannot express enough gratitude to our teens and mentors.

### **Extending the "Familial" Community— De'Shovon M. Shenault**

As a Black woman from a low-income family, I understand the impact that mentorship can have on student success. Being graced with great mentors during my graduate career promoted leadership skills, an affirmative mindset, and accountability. With the same level of integrity that was embedded in me, I developed into a mentor. Unfortunately, opportunities for such enrichment were limited due to social distancing and shelter in place

guidelines resulting from COVID-19. As the Heads Up Teen Mentoring Program transitioned to a virtual format in 2020, we provided a consistent, virtual format for teens to experience much needed camaraderie within our extended community. We help teens build skills to deal with the challenges of their new normal, such as navigating hybrid learning and maintaining loving relationships with family after sheltering in place for extended periods of time. As a mentor, I was able to provide teens with life skills development through one-on-one sessions, independent projects, and personal goals. In addition, holding my mentees accountable for their participation while developing a safe place to unravel personal challenges allowed for difficult dialogue and critical thinking that we could address together. Given the wealth of knowledge and resources available between mentors, we often spent time in our monthly mentor meetings strategizing how to support our teens' individual needs. These strategy sessions were particularly valuable during the pandemics. Our teens rarely experienced challenges that any one of the mentors had yet to overcome. By pooling our shared knowledge, we were able to develop solutions without adding yet another task to a mentor's already full plate.

The social ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic have challenged me to restructure how I connect with people. Specifically, connecting with teenagers through virtual platforms proved to be uniquely challenging. Facing drastic change in pedagogical formats, teens struggled with expected educational workloads, strained familial bonds, and the lack of motivation for personal care. We worked to increase teen engagement by implementing competitions and integrating social media. Despite our best efforts, students' participation has seen a dramatic decline. Our teens are still gaining the skills necessary to manage their time, communicate effectively, and maintain a positive mindset. I am confident that our consistent efforts to engage and uplift them have provided an environment with these skills in mind. We hope this provides an opportunity for mentees to experience a safe haven from the trauma that the Black community is facing.

### **CONCLUSION**

Collectively, we have reflected on how invaluable our service has been not only for our teens but also for ourselves as mentors. Lapses in communication, discontinuing in-person meet-ups, and navigating our response to the pandemics threatened the efficacy of our program. However, we worked together alongside our teens to address these challenges and shift to virtual

programming. Specifically, our transition away from a sole focus on academics to include social, personal, and financial development allowed us to realize the added benefit of providing emotional support and a safe place of community both for our teens and for us as mentors. Though the COVID-19 and long-standing police brutality pandemics continue to challenge our mentorship, our history of service and lifelong commitment to advancing the Black community leaves us confident that these are challenges we can take on together to continue offering mutually beneficial engagement.

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