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A Note From the Program in Education Chair

Despite the challenges and uncertainties of the past year, Partners for Success (PfS) continued to provide service to the community and schools, albeit in different ways. We have PfS Coordinator Maranatha Wall, Staff Assistant Joanna Middleton, and NC LiteracyCorps Member Kimberly Miramontes to thank for their commitment to serving PK-12 students and Duke undergraduates during this year like no other. We also thank our dedicated partners for joining us in determining the different ways community service can happen during a pandemic.

Pranav notes that providing SAT prep in a virtual learning environment is challenging, but working with kids is the best part of tutoring, whether it’s in-person or virtually.

The Alum Spotlight features Harvey Shi (2018) and Raisa Reed (2020). Harvey is a MD/PhD candidate in the Duke University School of Medicine, and Raisa is finishing her first year of law school at Stanford University. Both alums reflect upon their PfS experiences and make connections to what they are doing now.

Maranatha, Joanna, and Kimberly wrap up this edition of The Collaborator as they reflect upon the past year. With the likelihood of a return to in-person classes in the fall, they share what they hope will carry forward with a return to Duke in August. Adaptability, flexibility, and innovation top their lists.

Before you dive into the newsletter, you might find it interesting to know that PfS worked with 142 Duke undergraduates who provided 595 hours of service this year. More data is included at the end of the newsletter.

Also noteworthy is the work of the PfS Advisory Committee whose members continued their engagement in revisioning goals to more succinctly reflect our joint community/university partnership—more information to come on the new shared goals for PfS and our wonderful partners.

Best wishes for a joyful summer; make time for connections and reflections! Everyone looks forward to seeing you (hopefully) in-person in the fall!

Susan R. Wynn
Tell us a little bit about yourself.

My name is Annie Harrison, and I just finished my second year teaching fifth grade at Forest View Elementary in Durham and my fifth year in education. Teaching is a second career for me and I’ve been eager to learn as much as possible – I’m also a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. I have a husband and two adolescent daughters, all of whom are supportive of my teaching and learning shenanigans.

When the schools shut down, what did you feel was most important in terms of supporting your students?

Forest View, like the majority of Durham Public Schools, has Title I status (meaning that a significant percentage of children in the school qualify for free or reduced lunch). For us, the first and most important priority was ensuring the safety of our kids; all the teachers and administrators worked to contact every family at least once a week, every week, to make sure that they were healthy and able to find and secure community support. I called, emailed, texted, used social media, and even knocked on doors, as did so many other teachers at Forest View and schools across the district. After we knew that everyone was safe, we were able to shift gears and think about teaching opportunities and ways to keep the students learning, even though graded work had ended for the year.

What have you been up to in your teacher role since the stay-at-home orders?

I created a website that functioned as both a central check-in space and a depository for online and community resources that kids and parents could access from home. That took most of the first week – so many great activities were planned for the early days of the quarantine, and the kids loved streaming events like virtual tours of the Cincinnati Zoo and learning to draw with author and illustrator Mo Willems. Their parents often needed phone numbers for food security programs, healthcare facilities, school news, and other kinds of information, so there’s a page for that too.

I scheduled three Zoom calls per week for the first nine weeks of the shutdown: two casual check-in meetings and one guest speaker hour (see page 4). After the first couple of weeks, it became quite clear that it didn’t matter what we did during those meetings – the kids really needed to connect with one another, and hosting these was one of the most important things I could do for them.
Most teachers I know were actively involved in community food efforts, even to the point of purchasing groceries for their classroom families. I sewed about 300 masks and sold them to raise money for this purpose, so I was able to help with that several times thanks to the generous folks who paid for their masks and made extra donations, just to help out. Aside from groceries, I volunteered with the Durham Public Schools Foundation at food distribution sites around town.

What have been some of the most successful actions you've taken since shutdown?

I’m probably the proudest of our Wednesday guest speaker Zooms, which were some of the best attended meetings of the entire quarantine period. I reached out to friends and online groups to find guest speakers who would participate in Zoom calls with my students. Once a week, we “met” a person with an interesting job or skill, who shared details of what they did and answered questions from the students. Among other folks, we met an epidemiologist who studies COVID-19 (and helped put many young minds at rest when so much was scary and unknown). There was also a professional snowboarder who scored her first sponsorship at the age of 12 and her mentor, a former collegiate snowboarder in Utah; a stand-up comedian who played improv games with us; and a bearded dragon named Peggy, who appeared with her humans, Morgan Carney and Shaun Thompson, both members of the education community here in Durham. And so many more! People were incredibly kind and willing to take time out of their schedules for us, and I hope this attitude persists as we go forward into unknown ways of schooling.

What has been difficult?

The sudden departure and end of an entire school year hurt more than I ever thought it would. There was no closure for any of us, after eight months together as a classroom family. I had an amazing group of kids this year who had worked so hard and created so much— one project in particular, the Unity Summit, was difficult to leave unfinished.

Pre-quarantine: Forest View students working on their Unity Summit project - brainstorming the different communities they fit in to, and constructing a support network.
What are your thoughts about summer, and the start of the 2020/2021 school year? What do you think are the most important considerations?

I think it’s definitely time for a break. The students need time to heal and play – they’ve been juggling so much uncertainty about responsibilities, class meetings, requirements, and finishing a grade level, and I’m glad they’ll have a few months to recuperate (although what kind of teacher would I be if I didn’t say they should keep reading and working on those math facts?) Parents also need some time to recover after becoming de facto teachers and dealing with some major life changes, all while worrying about their families’ health and safety; a few months where they don’t have to remember deadlines and logins seems appropriate. I’d be lying if I said the teachers and staff didn’t need this time as well, though. The summer feels like a great time for everybody to take a deep breath and get their center back.

I don’t think we’ll ever see school the same way again, and I think the fall is going to be a challenging time – but also one full of growth and really intentional thinking and planning. Do I think we’ll go back? Likely, but almost certainly with scheduling and logistical changes that will be incredibly difficult to develop and implement. So I hope that we can all give each other the grace we’ll need to get through it: parents, kids, teachers, administrators, the community, everybody should understand that we’re all doing our best.

Thoughts about tutoring, and how PfS tutors could potentially provide support?

Our tutors were beloved members of our classroom, and the students were delighted to see them every time they visited! Assuming we’re hosting at least a portion of the day online, I would love for tutors to help us with breakout groups when we begin a new subject or topic.

Sometimes it’s difficult to tell if children are struggling when all we can see is a tiny picture of their faces, and having another person with us to speak to a small group and make sure that they all understand the concepts would be fantastic. The tutors who worked with us were fabulous in the classroom and highly competent future educators, so I absolutely believe that they’d rock a Zoom classroom.

"Our tutors were beloved members of our classroom and the students were delighted to see them every time they visited!"
I didn't see a child inside a classroom for 367 days. Almost a year to the day after our schools closed, we reopened DPS elementary schools; students who chose to remain at home could do so, but the children who needed to return were able to do so. However, they didn’t return to the schools they remembered: dots lined the hallway to remind them where to stand, desks were pushed apart and flexible seating like sofas and floor pillows had been removed, and instead of 20 classmates or more, my fourth graders had eight. The atmosphere in the building was one of waiting – things will be normal later, we’ll see all our friends later, your classroom will look like you remember it later. When loosely-assembled plans and procedures didn’t work the way we had hoped, well… they’ll work later. In lots of cases, later came eventually, and days became smooth, but nothing feels normal about this school year, and I doubt it will before it’s all said and done.

The return to school was a gift for teachers in so many ways. We stopped worrying about some of "our" children’s safety and health, because we could see them again and know that their families were well. At my school, most classrooms were hybrid, so some of the kids were still using Zoom to join class while others were in the room with the teacher at the same time. Many of the concerns about food security or housing assistance had been ironed out, and the uncertainty we felt for our families was lessened even more when we saw our school community reassemble in little chunks every day. And we were actually able to spend time WITH our kids – the isolation of a fully-virtual class was hard on most of the teachers I know, and simply sharing physical space was a delight.

If there is one thing I would share about the past year in education, it would be that DPS teachers and school staff have a deep, enduring love for their work with students. We wanted to be with our kids – I would say with confidence that 99% of the teachers in this country would have chosen to have full classrooms and the endless to-do lists of past years if it was possible. That said, though, one of the most repeated caveats in our conversations was, "If we knew it was safe." There are so many people making so many decisions, and with the influx of studies and research suggesting this or that about COVID-19 and its transmission, it was very difficult to know what "safe" would look like.

The decision to return to in person schooling came in March 2021. I’ve never been more proud of the community that made that decision work as best as it possibly could. Despite feeling frightened for their health, teachers returned to the school buildings and did their best to make classrooms welcoming and warm for the children who returned.

Long hours, tiny budgets, and endless amounts of love – that’s what I’ll remember from this spring, and from being a DPS teacher.

"If there is one thing I would share about the past year in education, it would be that DPS teachers and school staff have a deep, enduring love for their work with students."
University Assisted Community Schools

A Bass Connections research team seeks to understand how higher education institutions can have more effective and equitable relationships with local schools.

University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) engage, educate, and empower students, families, and community members. UACS focus on schools as core institutions for community engagement and democratic development, as well as link school day and after school curricula to solve locally identified, real-world, community problems. For neighborhood schools to function as genuine community centers, however, they need additional human resources and support. We emphasize “university-assisted” because universities, indeed higher educational institutions in general, can constitute the strategic sources of broadly based, comprehensive, sustained support for community schools. UACS engage universities as lead partners in providing academic, human, and material resources. This mutually beneficial partnership improves the quality of life and learning in local schools and communities while simultaneously advancing university research, teaching, learning, and service.

-UACS National Network

What Inspired this Bass Connections research project?

Songia Wynn (Duke): Educational inequity inspired this project. I believe that many schools within the Durham community are being left behind due to discrimination, housing malpractice, and overall underfunding. That’s why supporting these community schools is so important because we are creating a school partnership that caters to community specific needs.

Dr. Yolanda Dunston (NC Central): This project was inspired by the grand idea of fostering effective relationships and support between institutions of higher education and the public schools in their surrounding community. It’s evident that both NCCU and Duke have many programs, initiatives, and activities with the students in Durham Public Schools; what we didn’t know was where we duplicated, overlapped, or completely missed innovative or more meaningful opportunities to support the schools, students, and families of Durham.

Additionally, in the past, neither institution has made a clear or conscious effort to engage in the deep listening involved in the work of authentic university-assisted community schools. This project aimed to begin that work by listening to the stakeholders to find answers to those questions, and then embarking on our journey to do a better job of using institutional resources (human, material, and financial) to help local schools meet their self-identified needs.

"...what we didn’t know was where we duplicated, overlapped, or completely missed innovative or more meaningful opportunities to support the schools, students, and families of Durham."
Alec Greenwald (Duke): Our project was inspired by a campaign launched by the Durham Association of Educators (DAE) to bring community schools to Durham in the spring of 2018.

Members from our team became interested in thinking about how local universities could support and teach about the community schools effort in Durham. Further, participants from our team began to think about how the community schools methods could inform DPS and university partnerships more holistically.

Why is this work important for your institution?

Jasmine Benner (NC Central): I think it’s important for my institution because it shows the resources an HBCU has and the impact we can leave on a community.

Additionally, as many of NCCU’s teacher education program graduates go on to become hired in DPS, it is important for us to develop positive relationships and opportunities for our students to be properly introduced to and immersed in the public schools of Durham.

Dr. Yolanda Dunston: All NCCU first-degree students have a 120-hour community service requirement for graduation, and many students complete those hours by volunteering in classrooms across DPS. The work of university-assisted community schools is particularly important to NCCU because it paints a picture of what we as faculty and staff are doing well and where we fall short — important information that can be used to improve student training in content areas, tutoring strategies, cultural competence, and classroom management strategies.

"We want to borrow from best practices around the country to ensure that Duke and NCCU students are building maximum capacity while doing the least amount of harm to our public school communities."
Alec Greenwald: Community school and University-Assisted Community School models are robust and complex models that require political will for sustained funding, trusting relationships, and multi-disciplinary approaches to problem solving. Our team is excited to think critically about what type of role we can play in each of those conversations.

With regard to research goals, we are currently thinking about two different questions for exploration. To date, our data has been pointing towards the development of an anti-racist and culturally competent curriculum designed specifically for undergraduate students preparing to enter public schools. We want to borrow from best practices around the country to ensure that Duke and NCCU students are building maximum capacity while doing the least amount of harm to our public school communities.

Additionally, we will begin embarking on research surrounding the need for health services offered to students and families via community school buildings. Our site visits illuminated some extraordinary models around the country, and we are interested in exploring the viability of those models here in Durham.

What do you hope to accomplish or learn in year three?

Nicole Bonna (Duke): I am looking forward to continuing our data collection process by interviewing faculty and staff from peer institutions regarding undergraduate preservice equity training. Our team conducted dozens of these interviews this past year, but I am really excited to increase our sample size and consolidate best practices for various preparation models. Using this data collection and analysis, I hope our team can begin creating a training curriculum (specifically focusing on equity and anti-racism) for university engagement with Durham Public Schools. On a more individual level, I hope I can continue to develop my leadership skills by collaborating with my peers and our team leads.
Senior Highlight:
Shannon Fang

Duke Studies: Biology (Minor in Education)
Hometown: Leawood, Kansas
Favorite class at Duke: I loved both my focus classes for Knowledge in the Service of Society. If I had to pick one, Pursuit of Equality: Rethinking Schools – Lens of Social Justice

What has been your involvement with Partners for Success?
I have taken two out of five service-learning courses with PfS. I appreciated my service-learning classes because the experiences, interactions, and lessons learned were more valuable than what I could have gained just in the classroom.

What are your career goals?
My goal is to become a physician with a focus on health advocacy, social justice, and medical education. I want to work toward improving medical education curriculum to meet the social and preventive needs of patients and help to diminish the health disparities we see today.

What advice would you give to Duke students who want to work with kids in Durham?
The kids will teach you more than you teach them—be flexible, be an active listener, and know that you are one small support in their academic journey. You are there to root for their success.

Favorite moment with learners during your service-learning experience?
One of my favorite moments was the project showcase for my focus class. We worked closely with our 4th/5th grade buddies for the whole semester, and the showcase allowed them to share their research projects with everyone. It was amazing to see so many inspiring students who were proud of their work, as well as their Duke buddies, peers, and families cheering them on.

In your role as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator for The Duke Chronicle, you wrote some interesting education and social justice-themed articles. Are there particular articles you are most proud of and why?
I really enjoyed writing my article Duke and Durham: The story behind a shifting town-gown relationship because it allowed me to delve deeply into and share an important narrative between Duke and Durham that students should know about. I also got to visit and talk with community leaders, which was a great experience! I am also proud of the article We are tenacious: The first-generation, low-income student experience at Duke because I was able to lend a platform and a voice to students who are so often overlooked and marginalized.

Favorite memory at Duke?
My favorite memory at Duke was the last real day I had on campus before COVID-19. I visited the Durham farmer’s market in the morning, spent the afternoon in K-Ville with friends, and then watched Duke beat UNC in Cameron. Can’t get better than that!

What’s one self-care strategy you’ve been practicing since COVID-19?
I try to take a walk outside most days of the week with family or friends, even if it’s short. Getting out of the house and some fresh air is a needed break from Zoom fatigue!
Tell us a little about your service project.

**Vikram:** For our service-learning requirement, we were SAT prep tutors. It’s just Pranav and I, and we met twice a week. Pranav leads the math section on Tuesdays for about an hour and I lead the reading and writing section on Thursdays. We’re tutoring three students in the Durham area and have one other student occasionally join our tutoring sessions.

**Pranav:** The process is a little bit different for Vikram’s classes versus mine, but in a general sense, what we would do is we try to have some level of covering content related to the test during our sessions, but also combining a mix of test-taking strategies and getting the students acquainted with the format of problems. We didn’t have many materials going in, so we really had to adapt to that part and design our curriculum. It was challenging at first, but I used documentation on what the SAT covered in my own experience to make PowerPoints covering each of the math concepts on the test. During class, we would go through each of the PowerPoints, and I would mix in a couple practice questions from previous tests that they had already taken for practice.

**Vikram:** The reading and writing sections are very different from math sections. We would take a random reading section, read it together, answer the questions individually, and then we would go over all of them together. There was one specific book, the Erica Meltzer prep book, that we would use to do 15 or 20 of the types of questions they got wrong. We would do it as a group, and it would be a pretty fun activity. Each of us would take the spotlight for one question and talk about our thought process and how we got the answer we did.

What was challenging about it?

**Vikram:** I think one challenge that we both shared was the lack of resources that we started out with. I personally underestimated how much prep work that teachers have to do before class. It’s immense, and we only had four students. I had to find the passage, grade it, and also do it myself to make sure I knew the answers. Then, I created resources based off of that. It takes a lot of searching, processing, and accumulating, and even just absorbing the knowledge yourself. That all takes more time than it does to actually hold the class. You don’t really know how much work it is until you do it.

**Pranav:** I agree with Vikram. I think the big theme of any challenge was definitely not realizing teaching was this hard. Now I do. The other facet of that would be the virtual learning experience. I think Vikram and I both know what an SAT class looks like in-person: you work a section that’s printed out and you do it together. Given that we were only doing hour sessions twice a week, virtually, it was really hard to administer sections like that. We had to rely a lot on assigning work out of class and distributing materials in electronic format, so that there was some way that we could grade their answers. It’s hard to see how the students are working problems when you can’t look over their shoulder. Even though it’s easy to know what students are getting right, it’s hard to know their thought process and where we need to intervene.
Why is it important?

Pranav: Something I’ve learned through the course of the semester tutoring and with the class material we’re covering is that of all the things to tutor, SAT tutoring is possibly the most important. The reason is because it’s not something that’s taught at school. Most schools don’t prepare kids for the SAT. Kimberly (PfS NC LiteracyCorps member) and I have talked about this before, but there’s a whole industry based on getting students ready for this test. The SAT is the only real entrance test related to college that will actually get you there. It’s one of the barriers to entry into higher education that our society continues to impose. Getting people prepared for that and helping people to succeed is probably the most important contribution educational facilities could be making. It’s one that is probably being made the least by teachers because they just don’t have time or funding. So I think especially being able to tutor the SAT and being able to do so without worrying about how much each student can afford to pay for a class has made this a very important experience.

Vikram: I said this before, but these students are probably some of the smartest students in their school, yet this was their first exposure to SAT tutoring. I know there’s a whole tiger mom thing in society, but my parents exposed me to the SAT in fifth grade and I went to classes for a long time. It was excessive, but that’s not just unique to me. Pranav and I actually come from the same community. We live just 5 or 10 minutes away from each other. Everyone in our community has abundant access to SAT resources. My school had free SAT tutoring in the mornings and there were clubs that would do SAT tutoring. Thinking back, it was kind of taken for granted. All these resources and materials around us were just tossed around. The students that we’re teaching didn’t have exposure to these SAT resources until a week before their test date.

Vikram (cont.): It was kind of shocking to see the disparity in privilege and resources between our two communities. It highlights the inequality of SAT prep. It’s sad because, as Pranav was saying, it’s such a high barrier for college entry. I appreciate that we were given an opportunity to use our experience as a means to try to rectify the inequality and reduce the gap.

Pranav: I think Vikram would agree that at the end of the day, we don’t feel like we really did any “service.” We were really just working with kids. It’s the connections we formed. I think that matters a lot more than the work we did. We hope that it’s been a rewarding experience for them. We’re really excited to see how the results go. What matters is that we were able to work together and it’s clear, objectively and subjectively, how far the students have come. So we’re just really happy about the work we were able to put in.

What did you enjoy most about it?

Vikram: We had a really personal connection with the students, because they are an especially motivated group of students and are very intelligent. They were just as motivated as we were to learn the content of the course, and they always go above and beyond. I underestimated the amount of emotional connection that I would have with them. I feel very invested in their future success, and Pranav and I were talking about even continuing the SAT tutoring past the PfS service and through the summer, so we could properly see the students through taking the exams. I certainly enjoy getting to know them. Honestly, the tutoring sessions are really fun, and we have a good time.

Pranav: I definitely second enjoying all the personal connections. I think that’s also something that goes for a lot of PfS tutoring opportunities. I had one service-learning experience in the past and what I like about it the most is getting to interact with kids.

"Being able to tutor the SAT and being able to do so without worrying about how much each student can afford to pay for a class has made this a very important experience."
Harvey Shi | Alum Spotlight

Duke Studies: Class of 2018. Bachelor of Science in Engineering in Biomedical Engineering and Computer Science.
Volunteered at: Crest Street Tutorial Project
Hometown: Seattle, WA (family now lives in Waco, TX)
Favorite Class at Duke: That’s a tough one! I don’t have a favorite, but I did really enjoy Hip Hop II!

What are you currently up to?
I am currently a 1st year student in the MD/PhD program at Duke! It’s a 7–8 year program so will be in Durham for a while.

What motivated you to continue with Crest Street post-graduation?
I wanted to continue working with my tutee, Jalen, who was a rising junior at the time. I hoped to help him through the rest of his high school years and in his preparation for college.

What makes Crest Street special for you?
The fact that the organization was started from the ground up by a member of the Crest Street community, with former participants still contributing back to the program today. It has been really exciting to see how the program has enriched the education of kids from the Crest Street neighborhood and Durham at large.

What has been the most rewarding part of your time at Crest Street?
The most rewarding part has been seeing Jalen grow up and mature both as a student and as a person, and playing a small role in his development.

What advice would you give to students who want to volunteer in the community?
For me, the hardest part was getting started. I had been interested in volunteering in the Durham community for a while before finding Crest Street. I would definitely encourage students to really dig into their excitement for volunteering and focus their efforts on finding a volunteering organization that is a good fit for them. Once they get started, it is much easier to stay engaged.

In what ways have you been able to practice self-care this past year?
Taking time to go on hikes with friends, bike rides exploring the city, and just being intentional with carving out time off of work.

Why is it important to be civically engaged, whether as a student or as a professional?
Civic engagement is key because it connects us back to the needs and issues within our society. Civic participation can actively produce positive change for the community as well as provide a fruitful way to meet and build relationships with people outside our immediate communities.
Raisa Reed | Alum Spotlight

Duke Studies: Class of 2020. Psychology major, Education minor
Volunteered at: Lyon Park CommUNITY Scholars, Watts Montessori
Hometown: Little Rock, Arkansas
Favorite class at Duke: Black Feminism with Dr. Patrice Douglas

What are you currently up to?

I am currently finishing up my first year of law school at Stanford where I am pursuing a joint JD/MA in education policy in conjunction with the Graduate School of Education. This summer I will be working as an intern for the National Center for Youth Law in their Education Civil Rights Alliance.

Simultaneously, I have been held up by community and the love of those within my community who also want to fight for a more just world. So, I guess the lessons I learned at Duke are ones I will learn over and over again. I can’t save the world, but we can fight like hell to change it.

Advice for Duke students who want to work with kids in Durham.

My advice to Duke students who want to work with kids in Durham is to first humble yourself... a lot. You don’t have nearly as much to offer the kids as you think you do (teaching is hard!), and the work will humble you quickly if you don’t humble yourself. Second, have fun and be their friend! Some of my hardest goodbyes were to children who I had the pleasure of being friends with (and tutoring) for my entire four years at Duke! They learn so much better from tutors they like.

In what ways have you been able to practice self-care this past year?

In the last year, my greatest practices of self-care have been running and reading. There’s nothing like a good fiction novel to dive into some brief escapism, and running is such a quick way to crank out some endorphins to boost my mood. I’ve been lucky to really commit to both of these things in the last year when in normal times, I felt I never had any free time for them.

Upon reflection, what are a couple of lessons from your time at Duke that have resonated with you in your first year of law school?

The two biggest lessons I learned at Duke are: 1) None of us are saviors, and 2) We can change the world, but only if we do it together. Law school has been really challenging—particularly in the last year—as I have tried to grapple with the ways that the legal system and society writ large are unjust. In my toughest moments, I have been reminded that while the world needs saving, I am no savior.
How has empathy played a role in your work this past year?

**Joanna:** I feel as though what happened with the pandemic has given us a window into how other people deal with their personal lives and school lives and their communities, because it’s all just being made more obvious to us. When the pandemic first happened, I noticed there were a lot of parents and teachers working together, because they were trying to take care of the kids who didn’t have access to devices.

**Kimberly:** Thinking from that perspective, it was important to understand how interconnected all aspects of everyone’s lives can be like jobs, family, home life. You think you can have a balance and just turn it off when you close your computer. When you’re working from home, its especially hard to just turn it off. It’s necessary to consider everyone else’s personal lives at a time like this and understand that every little aspect of life has been impacted by the pandemic in some way, and be cognizant of the fact that people are struggling to balance work and home life.

**Maranatha:** Both of your reflections made me think of how mental health became a priority. I think everyone was more cognizant of the load that we were putting on others, or the load we were used to carrying personally pre-COVID. I think that empathy showed up in trying to be considerate of what other people were navigating, whether it was their home life with children and families, job loss or difficult situations. When thinking of students, they were dealing with some of these same things because most of them have been at home, too. Being cognizant of hurdles they were navigating, such as lack of access to technology, disrupted the typical perception that Duke undergraduates have access to tools that allow them to get their work done, but realizing that many undergraduates don’t necessarily have that. Ultimately, trying to be sensitive to all the different scenarios Duke students were finding themselves in.

**Joanna:** I became more aware of what people in my community were experiencing. Some of the people I know who live around me don’t have access to reliable internet. When everything first went virtual, those kids were just kind of stuck. Their parents needed to go to work and they were having to scramble to figure out what to do. I knew some of that was an issue, but the situation we’ve been in for the last year has made awareness of those challenges more visceral and obvious. It just brought everything to the surface.
Partners for Success Staff Reflect on the Past Year

Maranatha Wall, Joanna Middleton, Kimberly Miramontes

How do you think the transition back to in-person will be impacted by our empathy towards the realities communities are facing?

Joanna: It’s hard to imagine that everything can just go back to the way it was. Since the start of 2020, everybody has been changed to some extent. For kids in school, it’s been a significant chunk of their lives. For a kindergartner, a fifth of their life has been spent like this. I can’t imagine that going back to in-person learning will be a return to the way it was before. Problems that people hadn’t really thought about surfaced when everything shut down. In a similar way, going back is going to bring up other issues that we’re not aware of yet. There’s a need to continue to be open-minded and have empathy as we move into the next phase of all this.

Kimberly: This year has also been traumatic on different levels for people. And we know that traumatic events have repercussions. So, like you were saying, open-mindedness almost needs to be front and center next year because people may expect others to go back to normal when that really isn’t realistic based on the traumatic experiences of this past year. You can’t expect anyone to be able to forget about it that quickly.

Joanna: I found that my situation has made it easier for me to have empathy for our students, because I have a kid that left for college this year. And, it’s been incredibly hard. It’s been very challenging for him to be doing virtual learning in a dorm room while also dealing with all of the normal transitions that come with adjusting to college. It’s been a completely non-typical experience and I can see how difficult it is. So when we have undergraduates struggling to remember to send stuff to us, to reply to an email, or to complete various requirements, the situation with my son helps me to remember to have compassion and patience for them. I think about how I want my kid to be treated by people at his college, and act accordingly.

What was the transition into a more virtual environment like for you, in your personal and professional life?

Kimberly: When transitioning from college into the “real world” (I was a college senior spring 2020), something I was trying to balance in my personal and work lives was not putting too much pressure on myself to do or to be something. It was really hard job searching during a pandemic so I think not putting that pressure on myself, allowed me to be open to opportunities. Eventually I started working three jobs and they were all wonderful experiences. I’m genuinely so happy that I met tons of incredible people through them. Now I’m here, working with you, and gaining great experience. I think going into spring 2021 knowing I would be working one-on-one with students, I definitely thought about and wanted to be a person who was open to the students and gave them a space to share their thoughts. I wanted to be someone that they enjoyed talking to about their service-learning so that it didn’t seem like an assignment or requirement. We don’t know what they’re experiencing in balancing school and personal life. It’s been a nice thing for me to give back that empathy because when I graduated college, I was given empathy and grace from other people and that really helped during challenging times.

Maranatha: In March 2020, everything in-person immediately stopped. Everyone was following the national guidance around COVID. Going into the summer, we didn’t have a full sense of how much longer we were going to be at home, and folks wanted answers about what fall 2020 was going to look like for students. It really was a matter of being sensitive to our community partners, and that many of them were waiting on similar answers and guidance. We all had to be patient and be okay with not having answers. Dr. Susan Wynn was wonderful in that she modeled that really well and that helped me to have peace about not having the answers. Going into the fall, we were navigating new systems and learning as we went, and then making sure we were pacing ourselves so that we could actually keep up with what we set out to do.
Partners for Success Staff Reflect on the Past Year
Maranatha Wall, Joanna Middleton, Kimberly Miramontes

Maranatha (cont.): With that, we halved the tutor hour requirements. I also wanted to make sure that there was as little burden on teachers and community partners as possible. On the Duke side, I think that was everyone’s priority. Going into the spring, we had our systems in place, and we all had the recognition that we’re going to be here (virtually) until there’s a vaccine and most people are vaccinated. We had the models and experiences from the fall and were able to refine our approaches. I also wanted to challenge students a little more, given that we had been here for a year, but at the same time still holding space for the fact that things are still really hard and really traumatic. I wanted to up the accountability a smidge so that we could have a sense of normalcy, to the extent that we could even do that.

Joanna: I feel as though last spring we were all in a bit of a survival situation. Everything was extremely reactive, and we didn’t have very much control over anything. That urgency dropped off some as we started to get used to the situation. When we went into the fall semester, there was still a lot of being reactive and figuring out what we could do, and reacting to different guidance. As we came into this spring semester, we were able to be a bit more proactive because things had reached a new equilibrium. While there was still an awful lot of uncertainty, it wasn’t quite as frantic as it had been previously. I don’t think that we’ll entirely get away from being reactive for a while, but it won’t be in the same very urgent way that we experienced last spring and summer. At that time, nobody really understood what was going on, how the virus is transmitted, or how we could respond as a community. As a society we’ve learned a lot about managing the situation. Initially, we couldn’t figure out how we were going to do virtual tutoring. We weren’t sure how we were going to have two Duke students tutoring, how we could match them or how any of that would work. Now we have the structure to be able to do that. We don’t need to build the boat while we’re in it. To that extent, we’re not as reactive as we were, and we can plan better.

What do you hope the fall will look like for PfS and/or for Durham generally? What lessons do we hope to carry forward and/or what things do we want to leave behind?

Joanna: There have been some positive things that have come out of this year. Although you would never want to wish something of this scale on society, I think as a program it has helped us to learn how to be flexible and how to really build something good. We know that we can do that. If a crisis comes up in the future, we know that we can figure out how to adapt to it. We’ve all acquired skills that won’t be lost. Whatever happens in the fall semester, whether we go back to everything being in person, or a mix, or if (hopefully not) a bunch of COVID variants pop up, and we get stuck back into this staying-at-home thing, I think that we will deal with whatever comes up, and pivot pretty quickly to adapt.

Kimberly: I hope we can carry the same flexibility and openness into the next year because it creates space for new ideas. It gives that freedom to be creative and innovative, because other people are open to that and are willing to work with you to improve programs and try new things. When you try new things, you’re able to come up with ideas that are more sustainable and more effective to hopefully improve your impact and extend your reach.

Maranatha: I like the adaptability part. We do have those adaptability skills and tools more readily available to us now, given how much we needed to be adaptable this past year. So I hope that we can carry that as a program into the future. Also, even though we had our regular conversations with partners pre-Covid, I think that the conversations felt more in-tune, because the need was so specific, and the challenges were so specific, so I hope that we can continue to have those more granular conversations to continue to understand how we can come alongside our community and attempt to serve their priorities.
Partners for Success Local Impact 2020–2021

142 Duke undergraduates provided 595 hours of volunteer service to the Durham community

We worked with 18 host teachers and staff

6 Durham Public Schools

8 K-12 schools

We partnered with 12 community sites

1 GED preparation program

3 after school programs