

Victor A. Mensah, Class of 2016

Now that my time at Rutgers is coming to an end, I find myself looking back at the time I have spent here. In my first year, I remember feeling more lost, and overwhelmed than my classmates. As a first generation student at Rutgers, the transition from high school to college was a rather difficult one. At the end of my first semester, I was underperforming and was at risk of losing my scholarship. The following semester, a family friend who was an upperclassman at Rutgers at the time heard about my struggles and took me under his wings. He taught me how to efficiently study for my classes, how to build relationships with my professors and introduced me to interesting clubs, and most importantly taught me how to manage my time so I could get the full college experience without performing poorly in the classroom. I went from a student in trouble of failing out of college to one of the Dean's List the following semester. As great as it felt to do well, knew there were other first generation students at Rutgers in a similar situation but a not so happy ending.

I spent that summer devising a plan to start a peer-mentoring program for first generation college students and presented the idea to my advisor. This program would pair upper-class first generation students with incoming first year students. The mentors would serve as a guide much in the way my family friend did for me. In the summer after my freshman year, I founded the Student Support Services Peer Mentoring program with the mission of providing first generation students an easy transition from high school to college. In three years, the program has grown from 13 students to 120 students projected for fall of 2016.

After serving as president of the program for two years, I was offered an opportunity to join the Student Support Services staff as the program coordinator. My duties as program

coordinator includes meeting with program participants, conducting workshops on academic and career development, recruiting and training new mentors for 2016, and planning monthly activities and volunteering opportunities for the students. One of my students in the mentoring program recently came up to me with a plan to implement a service oriented club for first generation students at Rutgers. The program will take on the mission of working with inner city students during their college application process and promoting a college culture. This was one of my proudest moments. To know that I have inspired a student to go out and chart her own path and fight for the cause we spend so much time discussing is the highest of honors.

In addition to being a program coordinator on the college level, I also volunteer as a mentor to high school students interested in a career in medicine, a high school track and field coach, and a math and science tutor in New Brunswick High School. As a tutor of all grades from high school freshmen to seniors, one thing is apparent, the older the students get, there less interested they become in the sciences. One thing that has been personal and very apparent to me is the lack of minority representation in the STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics) field. Every year, less and less students, especially minority students are entering STEM fields. From what my students tell me in conversation, not much was being done to stimulate student interest in science and engineering at the high school level. Many people turn to tutoring as the solution to poor performance instead combating the real problem which is the lack of interest. When the topic of college majors comes up while I'm at the high school, the students always respond with "I don't like math" or "I'm not good at science" as the reason why they would not choose that career. I look back when I was their age and I remember liking science but not being very good at it and hating math. Lucky for

me, I was in a program in high school to exposed me to careers in the health field and lead me to consider a career as a doctor. I am lucky to say I have been accepted to Robert Wood Johnson Medical School as a medical candidate for the class of 2020. I was never a fan of math but I knew it was a challenge I had to overcome because I wanted to be a doctor.

Because of this, I did well in my math courses despite my lack of interest in them. This drove me to write and submit a grant to the Silicon Valley Foundation with a proposal to start a summer math and science camp for inner city kids that is designed to stimulate their interest in the field by showing them science and engineering can be fun and interactive. I hope this will be a step in the right direction as I continue my search for the root of this great divide between first generation students and the rest of the college population.

As I count down the days until I am no longer a Rutgers student, I look back with many fond memories and much gratitude for a University that gave me a medium through which I found my voice and my purpose. The simple rule I have always lived my life by is to operate in love, using my own experiences to better the experiences of others. I am lucky to be a Rutgers student and I hope to carry with me everything I have learned on my path to becoming a doctor and my continued civil service.