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## Student Reflections on Working a Virtual Program in a Global Pandemic

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# Student Reflections on Working a Virtual Program in a Global Pandemic

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For the past six summers, the Center for Community-Based Partnerships at the University of Alabama has hosted the Swim to the Top program at a local YMCA serving the Tuscaloosa, Alabama, community. The program offers instructor positions for undergraduate and graduate students attending the university. Due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Swim to the Top had to go virtual in 2020. For the first time, instructors had to create content and connect virtually with the campers at the YMCA. The purpose of this article is to share and describe the experiences of three Swim to the Top student instructors—an undergraduate student, master's student, and doctoral student—who participated in this virtual community engagement program during a global pandemic.

## **Perry Charles, Seeking an Undergraduate Degree in Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics**

This summer, I had the opportunity to teach youth swimming through the local YMCA with a group of fellow university scholars for the Swim to the Top program. The program has been active since 2015, yet this time we were faced with teaching kids during a global pandemic. Though this was my first time with Swim to the Top, I have taken so many lessons and experiences from participating in the program. The biggest lesson I learned this summer was how to adapt to unprecedented changes. As a group, we were initially asked to help conduct kids' swimming and water safety lessons through a recreational physical education (PE)-style curriculum that incorporated creative activities. As a swim instructor, my job was to help teach varying age groups water safety tips and swimming skills. Other individuals acted as PE instructors and facilitated and led the PE portions of the activities. Both PE and swim instructors were students at the University of Alabama and were recruited to play a vital role in the Swim to the Top program. Due to the changes and restrictions caused by

the COVID-19 crisis, we were faced with the problem of restructuring the camp to allow for safe instruction while minimizing contact among instructors and students. We resolved our issue by creating video recordings of the swim instructors and PE teachers, which allowed us to virtually teach and perform each activity as demonstrations to be played for the kids. Together, we created two to five swim and recreational videos per week for the camp. We visited different pools, lakes, and other sites in order to outline the basics of swimming, water safety, necessary equipment, and rules to follow.

I am an undergraduate student studying aerospace engineering and mechanics and minoring in mechanical engineering, so the Swim to the Top camp and swim instruction is not my usual scene. A typical day for me involves solving complex math equations or spending hours behind a computer screen working on engineering designs. I was able to step away from what I was more familiar with to work with PE majors at my university, as the majority of the instructors recruited through the Division of Community Affairs were within the kinesiology department. I really enjoyed working with a diverse group of instructors from different disciplines. I enjoyed my experience because I was able to learn about the importance of physical activity and swimming skills. Coming from a math and engineering background, I was able to contribute to a team that I had little in common with in creating content for the water safety videos. My ideas included going to a local lake or pool and discussing what proper water safety looked like in those settings. We worked off of one another's strengths and weaknesses in order to bring these swim videos to kids in these tough times. Working with Swim to the Top, I met other student colleagues, which allowed me to surround myself with people different from me who provided new perspectives. Also, I came to understand the relevance of a community-engaged program like Swim to the Top, the impact of learning how to swim, and the

confidence that can be gained from learning those skills as a kid. Prior to working with the program, I did not understand how teaching swimming could impact a whole community overall. Finally, the instructors were able to grow and learn from one another this summer and, even during an unprecedented time, adapt and sustain the Swim to the Top programming.

### **Jacob T. Peterson, Master's Degree in Sport Pedagogy, Kinesiology**

My second summer working as an instructor for Swim to the Top looked a lot different from the previous year as a result of COVID-19. However, the experience of working in 2020 facilitated new opportunities for me to grow professionally and learn to deal with adversity. The greatest takeaway for me was the readiness for adaptability among all instructors who worked with the program. Instead of teaching swimming strokes and water safety tips in person, we created quality instructional videos for the YMCA campers, a shift that required us to transition from swimming teachers to novice actors. By creating short, thoughtful virtual skits to relay water safety tips and swimming skills to our participants, we hoped the campers would find the videos creative and exciting to watch. We got to build online content and learn new ways to teach virtually, using methods including TikTok challenges, dance routines, and short scripted skits. Along with the videos we created, we uploaded detailed lesson plans and support resources online for our campers to engage.

However, not being able to watch the campers' reactions to our videos in person was difficult. The leaders at the YMCA shared photos and updates with all of us, which made me feel proud and excited to create new content. Through the process of creating novel content, the instructors gained a rapport among themselves, which was helpful during the more stressful periods of creating content in the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe the instructors were able to build this rapport thanks to the leadership and environment implemented by the Community Affairs team. The Community Affairs team, including faculty members, graduate assistants, and community partners from the YMCA staff, made everyone feel safe and appreciated, which allowed for all the instructors to be ready to create the videos.

Community engagement is valuable within my current field of study. As a future educator, I understand that connecting with the community

is a needed skill. In education programs, I have learned how to utilize teaching styles and develop curriculum models. However, there are few opportunities to participate in community engagement. Programs like Swim to the Top align with my aspiration to practice diverse forms of experiential learning. As a student in the field of education, I get applied experience with teaching and working with students in the community. Unlike student teaching experiences, Swim to the Top extends to helping the students gain physical activity, swimming survival skills, and enrichment knowledge. Also, the program provides opportunities to engage with parents and discuss their child's swimming improvement. I feel that there is a real impact being made and that everyone involved is benefiting from the program. Instructors and students alike are gaining important skills, which demonstrates the value of community-based partnerships.

Although I hope to be teaching in person next summer, I really enjoyed working with the team of university faculty, university students, and YMCA staff who helped implement virtual programming in the summer of 2020. Through my experiences in 2020, I developed new professional skills, such as being able to deliver alternative content and confront adversity positively and optimistically.

### **Jamie Brunson, Seeking a Doctoral Degree in Sport Pedagogy, Kinesiology**

The University of Alabama's Swim to the Top program presented me with an opportunity to work with underserved children in Tuscaloosa during the COVID-19 global pandemic. I had not been given the opportunity to engage in a community-based program before coming to America, and I felt fortunate to be able to connect with a community that I had not previously known about. However, participating in Swim to the Top presented many unforeseen challenges (e.g., building relationships on a virtual platform, creating accessible content, presenting applicable content, and authentically assessing learning and progress) and required my coworkers and me to reimagine how we could best embody our roles within the Swim to the Top program based on COVID-19 health and safety protocols. More specifically, my role consisted of working with the directors of the Swim to the Top program to create and develop supplementary tasks, content, resources, and assessments focused on general, physical, health, and character education for

children and parents to experience while at home or at the YMCA.

Upon reflection, my experience working for the Swim to the Top program took me back to my days as a full-time PE teacher in London, England, and developed my understanding of and ability to create learning aids for a new community. I am extremely proud of how the University of Alabama was able to host its annual Swim to the Top program and teach a significant number of children from underserved communities despite having limited access to facilities, working through social distancing restrictions (e.g., wearing face masks), and having to conceptually create and pedagogically deliver a virtual program. Although I had previous experiences creating content, I had never had the opportunity to create content for students and their parents in such a diverse area. Creating content for both students and parents was a new opportunity that helped me to grow professionally and enabled me to be more creative based on students' needs and circumstances. Specifically, I provided resources for both students and parents to do activities together and to learn about the importance of water safety. Furthermore, working with Swim to the Top allowed me to gain professional development in an American community. In my experience, learning how to swim in English schools was legally and legislatively mandated. Therefore, working in a community that had little exposure to swimming education was an experience that allowed me to feel more connected to the community of Tuscaloosa. I believe that working with Swim to the Top allowed me to gain more exposure to physical activity within American culture and motivated me to engage in more meaningful work associated with community programs in my future endeavors.

### **About the Authors**

Jacob T. Peterson is a PhD student in the Department of Kinesiology with a specialty in sport pedagogy at the University of Alabama. Peterson works as the graduate research assistant in the Division of Community Affairs' Swim to the Top program. Jamie Jacob Brunson is an assistant professor of physical education teacher education at the University of Memphis. Perry Charles is an undergraduate student in the Department of Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics at the University of Alabama.