



# An open letter to past, current and future mentors of Black neuroscientists

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We as Black trainees in neuroscience and co-founders of Black In Neuro wrote this open letter to thank the phenomenal mentors who came before us. We also aim to encourage and give advice to future mentors on how to effectively mentor the next generation of Black researchers.

Dear Neuroscience Community,

After years of racial injustice, the many recent BlackInX movements have highlighted the experiences of Black trainees in academia<sup>1</sup>. We — as Black trainees — account for only 6% of all neuroscience PhD students in the USA, despite making up 14.7% of the population nationwide. In the UK, Black students account for 4% of graduate research trainees, yet account for only 1.2% of trainees funded by UK research councils<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, in some other countries, like Canada, the number of Black PhD students regardless of field is not recorded at all.

The work of BlackInX movements have shown that Black trainees are more than data points and more than solutions to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Yet, we still struggle to feel like more than statistics. We know that neurons and glia need the proper environmental support to develop into mature, unique cells. Like those cells, trainees need the proper support and guidance to succeed in academia. Guidance in the form of mentorship is a core factor for developing a positive scientific identity, maintaining well-being during graduate school, and achieving academic success and career advancement<sup>3–5</sup>. However, based on collective anecdotes from peers, we know it is rare that Black trainees receive proper mentorship and investment in their development. To this end, we write to thank the mentors who have given us grace and unwavering support in our journeys towards leadership and we ask the future mentors of Black trainees to do the same.

There are varying approaches to mentorship in neuroscience. Some mentors foster your love for the hands-on, problem-solving nature of the field, whereas others train you to think critically about your data and push you to face more challenging questions. Some are more involved in asking questions about your life outside of the lab, while others prefer to keep it strictly science-focused. Despite such differences in mentorship styles, our experiences have taught us that good mentorship relies on these fundamental principles: compassion, advocacy and support. With these values, we see that our mentors believed in the Black In Neuro initiative and in

us as individual Black trainees. They believed we would not only do something great but be something great.

To our past and current mentors who have shown us compassion in the face of our failed experiments and personal struggles: you've breathed confidence into us. As we faced obstacles as Black trainees in science and in life, your compassion quieted our insecurities about becoming capable neuroscientists. To those mentors who went above and beyond to embrace the intersections of our identities as Black, Afro-Latinx, Immigrants, LGBTQIA+ and more: you ensured that we had faith in not just in our science but also in ourselves. For the mentors who uprooted the seeds of doubt caused by systematic racism in the field: you gave us a sense of belonging in the neuroscience community.

From those of us who were guided by Black mentors: you taught us the value of representation. Seeing someone who looks like you achieve your dreams sparks ambition, curiosity and hope. It permits us to breathe easier. Your presence increases our sense of belonging in academia and our desire to stay here<sup>6</sup>. As Black scholars in predominantly white spaces, we thrive on these interactions; but we know it comes at a cost to you. You navigate inequitable spaces, receiving fewer grants, authorships and lower salaries<sup>7–10</sup>, while continuing to bear the brunt of DEI work to make this a better space for us. We are motivated by your leadership and seek to guide future Black neuroscientists in the same manner.

To present and future mentors of Black trainees: we emphasize that we need mentors to teach us how to navigate academia as individuals who are 'breaking the mold' of what a scientist looks like. We need mentors who are champions, and who, rather than ignoring our identity, celebrate it. We are multifaceted individuals who are often pioneers not just in STEM but in our families as first-generation graduates. We are minority ambassadors who juggle lab work with necessary outreach initiatives. We are mentors to marginalized students because we understand the value of representation. We are consultants on unpaid DEI efforts in the department. Most importantly, we are human beings who are expected to work diligently while witnessing the egregious social

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injustices faced by Black people worldwide. We need mentors who acknowledge that all of these, often undervalued, duties are born out of necessity, not by choice.

We need mentors to teach us how to navigate predominantly white spaces and who actively try to diversify them. As Black trainees dealing with micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions daily, we need representation and community.

Although pipeline programmes and other diversity initiatives have trained and successfully guided many of us through the neuroscience field, invested mentors truly make a difference. We are brought to the proverbial 'table' through these wonderful initiatives, but we need in-lab support to keep us there. All of the diversity-led funding in the world will not retain a budding scholar who lacks critical guidance. As our mentors, you can provide us with opportunities to publish, present our work, co-author grants, develop networks and teach us to negotiate salaries. Most importantly, as future Black leaders in the field, we need to know that you believe that we belong in the neuroscience community. This means that you will advocate for us, even when we're not in the room. That you will not stay silent when we encounter toxic situations and colleagues.

We have experienced both negative and positive mentorship. Negative mentorship destroyed our confidence and made us question if we can succeed. This self-doubt can dissuade us from staying in the field. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of the 'leaky pipeline' as we seek community elsewhere. Conversely, positive mentorship has often been the deciding factor for our retention in STEM. One good mentor, regardless of ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status, can make all the difference. Good mentorship gave us confidence not just in our scientific ability but also in our success, our struggles and what is perhaps the most important conviction — that we belong. Thus, our experiences in inclusive training environments with exceptional mentors contribute to our goal of supporting, uplifting and cherishing all Black scientists.

To the Black In Neuro community: we know that many of you lack the mentorship you deserve or have never met another Black neuroscientist. That is why Black In Neuro was created. Founded on the ideals of support and visibility, we welcome you to our family and encourage you to contact our community members for mentorship, regardless of which academic stage you are in. We want our legacy to live on in future generations of

Black neuroscientists. If you are a non-Black mentor of Black trainees, connect your mentees to Black In Neuro events and help them find other mentors through our profile pages. Support your Black trainees in and outside of the lab to cultivate not just their scientific career but also their development into exceptional leaders and mentors.

True diversity, equity and inclusion rely on representation and accountability. Through the promotion of these principles, we hope that the neuroscience community as a whole can continue to generate high-quality science and build leaders who feel seen, valued and accepted.

With love and respect,

Black In Neuro co-founders Kaela, Rackeb, Elena and Angeline

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#### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

#### RELATED LINKS

Black In Neuro: <https://www.blackinneuro.com/>

#BlackBirdersWeek, #BlackInNeuro: Black scientists, physicians are using hashtags to uplift: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/2020/08/04/blackinneuro-blackinchem-can-hashtags-help-black-scientists-build-community-spotlight-excellence/5541431002/>

Society for Neuroscience, Report of Neuroscience Departments & Programs Survey (Academic Year 2016–2017): <https://www.sfn.org/-/media/SfN/Documents/Survey-Reports/NDP-Final-Report.ashx?la=en>