

Empowering Black Minds: Fostering Self-Determination and Intellectual Legacy

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Within academia, experiential learning is indicated as a cornerstone of High Impact Practices (HIP). Traditionally, such programs in Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) have predominantly attracted upperclassmen White women to European destinations, often rooted in familial ties and relatability (IIE, 2022 and NAFSA, 2023). However, this narrative reveals a critical disparity in representation and accessibility for Black students. Added to these narratives are perceived financial barriers that limit student of color accessibility to experiential learning. This added to traditional entry barriers such as class standing, GPA requirement and geographic irrelevance. The absence of diverse and inclusive narratives and cultural resonance dissuades many Black students from engaging in these transformative experiences, perpetuating an exclusionary cycle.

Amongst many universities' Study Abroad/Experiential Global Learning offices, there is a disproportional number engagement in countries within the 7 continents. Majority of the programs offered are within the European and Asian continents which typically attract students that have familial history and/or can trace their heritage to these locations. This limited location offering contributes to the ever growing narrative that Black students are uninterested in experiential global learning opportunities. Denying Black students of the some of the key benefits of participating in Study Abroad/Experiential Global Learning: college persistence, academic achievement and sense of belongingness.

At the University of Connecticut's Experiential Global Learning Office, in response to creating equity in this space, and broadening our level of engagement across the continents, efforts are underway to create inclusive experiential learning opportunities tailored to Black students' heritage and sense of belonging. Initiatives like the *FinTech in Ghana* program, spearheaded by two Black women leaders, exemplify this shift. This program challenged many narratives by removing academic standing requirements – opening up participation to freshman and removing the GPA requirement – allowing all students in good academic standing to participate in the program. The design of this program was very intentional - to ensure students experience Ghana from a cultural relative point of view rather than an ethnocentric view. Local historians and academics taught the country's' history and culture – allowing the history to be told through the lens of the locals. While students were encouraged to immerse themselves in the food, culture, music and literature of the country.

Countries within the African continent is often viewed to be impoverished and in need of “help” in media (Harth, 2012). This program is focused on using Ghana as a case study for understanding booming financial technology (FinTech) sector, Cocoa supply chain in Ghana and exploring the rich culture of Ghana, pre-, during and post- colonialism. The cohort-based program was designed to have 20-25 students who live, eat and travel together throughout Ghana for a total of 10 days (about 1 and a half weeks). The class's structure engagement was designed to mimic much of the rich history in West Africa. As a people, West Africans share knowledge through storytelling (Keller, 2014) and build great bonds through communal eating (Callender, 2019). Students on this program partake in excursions throughout the day where they can discuss with company CEOs that look, sound like them, and embrace their traditional attire and hairstyles. In the evening, the course work was presented with accompanying classroom style discussions. This program also offers mentorship, collaborative spaces, and global perspectives

while nurturing self-determination and perpetuating an enduring intellectual legacy among Black students.

The unexpected outcome of this program was profound. Students not only shared testimonials of feeling a sense of belonging but also expressed newfound confidence in their abilities and a sense of pride in their heritage continent. This sense of belonging empowered many students to forge lasting relationships formed during the trip. Additionally, some students secured internships during the program, while others enthusiastically planned future experiences together. This program not only provided a transformative experience but also facilitated long-term personal and professional growth for its participants. One first-year student stated, “there is a me before Ghana and a me after Ghana” as a way to show the difference/growth this experience had on their overview of not just their academic journey but their life. This same student went on to participate in 3 more experiential global learning opportunities after this experience, with a fourth experiential program and research work planned in Kenya this summer.

Through deliberate efforts to foster representation and cultural resonance, academia can dismantle barriers and empower Black students to embrace experiential learning as a catalyst for personal and intellectual growth. This change in thinking not only cultivates a more inclusive educational landscape but also affirms the transformative power of Black intellectualism in shaping a more equitable society.

References

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