



Supporting Black Student and Educator Success

Reimagining Higher Education Institutions Through an African-Centric Lens

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*“Your destiny is connected to Africa.
We are here to claim this space.
We are the child that may have been forgotten, but we are back.
Our ancestors have called us. We are here. Let’s do this work together.”*

EDWARD BUSH, FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN, ALL-AFRICAN DIASPORA EDUCATION SUMMIT,
AND PRESIDENT, COSUMNES RIVER COLLEGE

SINCE 2022, THE ALL-AFRICAN DIASPORA EDUCATION SUMMIT (ADES) has led two learning journeys for the purpose of strengthening Black student experience and outcomes, with a special focus on the California Community Colleges (CCCs). Across these two journeys, more than 600 mostly Black community college educators and administrators (fellows) have traveled to Ghana to immerse themselves in African-centered education and to identify new ways to deliver education and services to Black students, who are underrepresented both in college enrollment and success. At the same time, participants experienced not just professional development but what many described as transformative personal growth as they came face-to-face with the history of enslavement of their ancestors, thus sharpening their reckoning with institutional racism in American higher education.

This brief attempts to document some of the motivations, experiences, and future plans of the fellows who participated in the 2024 summit in Accra and Cape Coast, Ghana. We use the term *attempts* in this case as it is perhaps impossible to fully capture the scope and variety of participants’ experiences in a professional development composed of so many dimensions. But this much is clear: Given the urgent need to identify new approaches to meeting the needs of Black students and the educators who serve them, the ADES initiative merits attention from practitioners and policymakers alike.

This brief begins with background and context about the history and intersection of Black people within higher education in the United States, followed by details of the components of the ADES program and participants. Next, it highlights the integral relationship between professional and personal development and considers ADES through the lens of critical community building. Throughout, the brief also spotlights perspectives from the ADES community and includes several examples of student-focused projects incubated by college teams during the summit.

Background and Context

American higher education is founded on anti-Black racism. During the Colonial era, colleges actively participated and benefited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade,¹ relying upon enslaved Africans to build and serve these institutions and their stakeholders. This racism persisted through centuries of exclusion of Black people from American institutions of higher learning. It was not until the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1964) that Black Americans won access to these institutions. Although the Civil Rights reforms provided access, Black students are underrepresented in college enrollment and, among racial subgroups, the least likely to persist to degree.

In California, Black high school students have a college-going rate of 55% compared to the statewide average of 62%.² Black students predominantly enroll in CCCs, and only approximately one-third successfully transfer to four-year universities in six years.³ In terms of degree attainment, Black students have the lowest four-year graduation rate among all racial categories.⁴ Moreover, Black faculty are underrepresented in full-time faculty positions, with Black females constituting only 4% of full-time faculty, while Black males constitute just 3%.⁵ Inequities for Black people have persisted and remain intact.

Recent legal challenges, as well as a backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, have further eroded policies to address racial inequities in higher education. For example, in 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled race can no longer be considered in university admissions,⁶ further solidifying anti-Black racism in higher education, a direct assault on efforts to level the educational playing field achieved through the Civil Rights movement and affirmative action policies. More recently, the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education has threatened to withhold federal funds from any educational institution that uses race as a consideration in any aspect of its functions.

Nevertheless, Black students and educators navigate racialized spaces within institutions of higher education. If these institutions are committed to the success of Black people, spaces must be created that are rooted in Black identity and that allow for healing from personal and historical traumas. The ADES emerged as a vehicle to support and elevate Black professionals and students to recenter themselves in the landscape of higher education on a global scale.

"We need to identify better strategies to support our [Black] students, who are still struggling at so many levels."

2024 ADES PARTICIPANT

Features of the All-African Diaspora Education Summit

ADES brings educators together in Africa to strive towards implementing African-centric education in American educational organizations. The organization convened its first summit in 2022 and its second in 2024.

Educators across the United States convened in Ghana, striving towards the organization's theme of "colonization to sovereignty" by 2032. ADES is allied with other organizations of similar mission, such as A2MEND, a California Community Colleges-specific entity that supports Black students navigating education and career pathways.

Organizations like A2MEND have tracked performance data of Black students in community colleges compared to their peers. Black students have the lowest completion and transfer rates, as compared to other racial/ethnic subgroups.⁷ The lack of success for Black students catalyzed ADES and motivated participants attending the summit.

Participants' Motivation

Although participants primarily had a professional connection to the California Community Colleges, their motivations for participating in the summit were multifaceted. Participants sought to learn new approaches for connecting with and supporting the success of their Black students. "[I'm looking for] the opportunity to learn and discover research strategies on African-centric education;" and "I look forward to learning more about African-centered educational practices and pedagogy to influence the shift we are seeing in education since the pandemic," noted two separate participants on a pre-journey survey. Participants described a uniquely personal opportunity as Black/African American educators to participate in professional learning. As one put it: "The opportunity to visit the continent was the first reason. In addition, we need to identify better strategies to support our students, who are still struggling at so many levels." Yet another described it as a "once in a lifetime opportunity to grow."

The motivations shared by participants demonstrate the complexity and importance of this journey. In part, fellows expected to gain professional development for their respective roles in higher education, but their anticipated personal journey also held significance. Research indicates that change in practice is more likely to occur if professional development programs are sustained, collaborative, practice-based, and maintain buy-in from participants, among other features.⁸ The professional development that fellows undertake through the ADES summit includes these features, as the summit occurs over a ten-day period, offers multiple opportunities to collaborate and network, and draws on and elevates individuals' knowledge and experiences. It is this celebration of others' perspectives that underscores the asset-based approach ADES employs. In this case, an "asset-based approach" (wherein others' insights, cultural practices, and linguistic backgrounds are viewed as valuable sources of knowledge) counters narratives of deficit ideology, seeks to critique injustices, and is associated with positive outcomes.⁹

While the summit overall supported professional development, it also emphasized personal development, which was identified as a prerequisite for change. As ADES Founder and Chairman Edward Bush described, "The PD [professional development] aspect of this [the summit] is ancillary, it is an outcome of the personal, the spiritual. Your spirit, your soul, your intellect, that personal development is more important than we normally think. In order to develop the professional you have to develop the person. A lot of PD falls short because of the disconnect. Ways of showing up in the classroom evolve because you also evolve as a person." With the professional and the personal intertwined, ADES participants were able to access a unique opportunity for transformative growth to inform and enhance their work with and support of Black students and staff in their institutions.

Building a Critical Community

Given the challenges institutions face in serving Black students, ADES brings together individuals who seek new approaches to support them. Underlying the effort is an acknowledgment that what our institutions are doing now is not enough. ADES fellows are asked to grapple with their own professional practice: How does it serve Black students? What more can we do? How do we bring more allies into this work?

"Critical community building" is the lever through which broader systemic change is considered possible. Bettez (2011) defines *critical communities* as "interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical questioning assist each other in thinking

A critical community building approach unveils systemic inequities, fosters strong support networks, promotes a sense of agency and responsibility, and questions dominant norms and goals that perpetuate oppression and privilege.

through issues of power, oppression, and privilege."¹⁰ In this case, a critical lens acknowledges that there are multiple socially constructed realities, historical contexts, and lived experiences in any situation, including higher education, and that each is recurrently impacted by issues of power operating in a complex interplay of structure and agency.¹¹ Therefore, a critical community building approach unveils systemic inequities, fosters strong support networks, promotes a sense of agency and responsibility, and questions dominant norms and goals that perpetuate oppression and privilege.¹²

Each of these components was present at the ADES convening. Prior to arrival and throughout the summit, for example, attendees were prompted to consider the challenges (both academic and personal) that Black students face in their own institutions and the policies and practices that hinder more than help. Additionally, learning sessions were organized to allow participants to reflect on their experience both as individuals and as a collective, providing space to discuss, critique, and question the dominant norms and goals embedded within the U.S. educational system and within participants' own positionality. These sessions, along with the camaraderie that often develops with travel and joint endeavor, helped to build a support network among ADES attendees that extended past the end date of the summit. This supportive network was evident in post-conference conversations, cross-college project collaborations, and the sustained use of the conference app for questions and idea generation.

In addition, the summit was underscored by a sense of agency and responsibility, as attendees were tasked prior to arrival and met throughout the summit to design and develop a project to support Black students (and/or faculty) at their institutions. In this sense, the summit fostered the creation of a critical community centered on the academic and social well-being of Black students and staff in postsecondary institutions. As building a critical community is both a process and a goal, the work is never done—it is a continual commitment to question norms and promote alternative pathways to equity.

An essential aspect of critical community building is active listening, not just with those of similar viewpoints, but also among those with alternative perspectives.¹³ In this case, seeking out dialogues across lines of cultural difference can enhance the community as a whole, particularly as those with different perspectives may pose questions others may not think to ask. These external perspectives may be helpful simply because they are different, and can ultimately broaden understanding and strengthen the values and actions of the community.¹⁴ At the summit, this commitment to alternative viewpoints was evident in its attendees, which included primarily diaspora but also some non-diaspora participants. Beyond race/ethnicity, attendees varied in gender identity, age, and occupation (e.g., students, staff, administrators, researchers), comprising a diverse group of individuals with a common goal of understanding how to support Black individuals in higher education.

What Happens: The Arc of the ADES Experience

The ADES experience is anchored around three core tenets:

- African-centered education: What is it, and how can we embody it in our work as educators and practitioners?
- Pan Africanism: the core idea that peoples of African descent share common interests and should be unified.
- Sankofa: an African symbol of a mythical bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg (symbolizing the future) in its mouth.

For 10 days, communities of African Diaspora educators and leaders are challenged to consider what it would take to disrupt the racism and anti-Blackness that are persistent features of our institutions and education systems. They are also challenged to expand their understanding of present realities by standing in places where past atrocities of human enslavement were committed.

Educational transformation through African-centered teachings positions the interests of Black students at the center. This agency-centered (versus marginalization) approach is foundational to ADES. Discussion and reflection activities pushed participants to examine their existing commitments and actions and to interrogate their ‘set point’ as educators and leaders from status quo to transformation. What would schooling look like if it honored the identity of Black students? Although open to non-African descent participants, the “All-African” Diaspora Education Summit purposely centers African-Diaspora participants because essential to an African-centered approach is the “notion that African American[s] need to be in control of their own narratives.”¹⁵

The teachings of Pan-Africanism—the unification of people of African descent—are key to the ADES experience. Fellows engaged with Pan-Africanism as a global movement toward common interests of ending White supremacy and colonialism, as expressed in the teachings of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, whose leadership (not without controversy) inspired a broader vision of liberation. Fellows came face to face with the shared destiny of Africa and the African Diaspora standing in the library of W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most prominent scholars of Pan-Africanism, who made Ghana his home at the end of his life. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity,” writes Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

Finally, ADES is about facing history as we contend with our current selves. Nothing prepares a person for the physical and emotional experience of visiting the ‘Last Baths’ and extensive slave dungeons of Cape Coast. These spaces of horror, now sacred sites of pilgrimage, are preserved to teach and remind us of the scope and scale of industrial-level enslavement of human beings. They represent a true architecture of depravity, where deliberate forms of suffering and inhumanity were perpetrated for centuries. The collective healing that follows through the remaining days of ADES is the embodiment of Sankofa, a reminder that to understand our present and secure our future, we must know our past.

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

Taking it Home: Individual and Collective Development

The combination of professional and personal development afforded by the ADES experience was especially profound for participants from the African Diaspora. Through visits to culturally significant sites, cultural exchange, and the space to both confront and begin healing from trauma, attendees not only deepened a sense of belonging to the continent and the culture, but also to each other and within themselves. The summit allowed participants to encounter not only what was, but what could be.

One African Diaspora participant reflected upon their return: “Once you begin to be enlightened, you look at everything you’ve been taught over a lifetime, what we were taught in schools...We’ve been conditioned to show up in professional spaces not just as people, but specifically how we’ve been conditioned as Black folks to show up in professional spaces. To blend in. Not to speak up even if things are being done or things we are being asked or directed to do are clearly not in the best interest of our community.” Participants felt a sense of urgency to share this experience and its lessons with their campus communities. At one college, during an all-college meeting where ADES fellows presented on their experiences in Ghana, a non-African Diaspora participant described returning to her role as a counselor with a renewed sense of purpose and issued a call to action, urging colleagues to support Black faculty, staff, and students:

“I’ve come back with renewed energy and spirit and courage to advocate more and support my fellow Black colleagues, who, due to the color of their skin, their heritage, have had to tirelessly advocate from day one for our Black students, and sometimes directly or indirectly over the years they’ve been dismissed...”

“Yes, you may only have that one Black student in your classroom, or you may have only that one Black student in line waiting to be served in your area. But when you just take a brief moment to connect with that student, learn why they’re here... That sends a message, not just to that student, but all students who are watching because they are watching. You’re building that sense of belonging that we keep talking about ... that’s how we retain students here and let them know that learning is safe and possible at this institution.”

“We have come back different. A different presence.”

ADES 2024 PARTICIPANT

Participants returned with a heightened sense of agency and a commitment to improve the experience of Black students and staff at their own institutions. One attendee explained:

“We have returned to a state of being that had been stripped away by the U.S. [and have] come back with some determined way, still unknown, of how to make it a permanent part of our existence... How do I alchemize those urges to be something productive, innovative... to create something new?”

This sense of revitalization and reflexivity was echoed by another participant, who described returning with a “Ghana glow” and added, “We have come back different. A different presence.” In this case, the process of reflexivity (the examination of one’s own beliefs, assumptions, and actions and how they may affect what one thinks or does) is crucial in critical community building,¹⁶ as it encourages reflection on and evolution of one’s own frameworks and potential biases, a practice that can guide and shape the way forward. Therefore, in this sense the ADES convening was a journey of the self as much as it was about interrogating existing institutional policies and practice, and understanding the promise of African-centered education.

In addition to individual development, a collective journey also took place. This included a bonding among conference participants as a whole and among smaller groups organized along institutional, professional, and regional connections. It also occurred between African Diaspora and non-diaspora attendees. As participants listened and learned from one another during project meetings, in break-out sessions, or enroute to new locations, the porous borders of the growing critical community enabled connections to develop and networks to strengthen. Block (2008) asserts that the “unit of transformation” is the small group and that their leverage increases when formed within a larger gathering.¹⁷ Given each participant’s personal and professional development throughout the convening and the collective learning that occurs in reciprocal exchanges within and between groups, attendees returned with renewed purpose, plans for institutional change, and newfound networks of support.

Team Projects Developed During ADES

During their time in Ghana, institutional teams were given dedicated time to incubate and plan new initiatives—with a common goal of increasing Black student and employee success—to implement at their institutions upon return. On the final day of the summit, teams presented their work to the full group. We highlight several of these projects with brief sketches here to provide a sense of the variety of ways in which fellows planned to “take it home.”

Cerritos College

A team of fellows, including the college superintendent/president, three trustees, the faculty senate president, and chair of the counseling department, developed a new educational pathway entitled, “Journey to Cultural Success for our Students”, which would include:

- Two semesters of African and self-exploration in a dedicated learning community, with a focus on progress to degree;
- A call for faculty to integrate cultural experience across the curriculum, so that “students can be in touch with who they are”;
- A summer abroad experience at the University of Ghana that would affirm cultural identity;
- A campus internship in the student’s discipline; and
- A student research project and dedicated space for students to work.

With students of color at Cerritos graduating at half the rate of White students, the team committed to push the college to abolish language that talks about specialized programs, rather embracing the understanding that “those are our students.”

Long Beach City College

The team at LBCC developed plans for a new Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) in Social Studies with an emphasis in African American Studies. The partnership between LBCC’s Black Studies program and Ethnic Studies Department aimed to offer initial courses in the new pathway starting in fall 2025, just one year after ADES. In addition, LBCC also planned to leverage the recent opening of a new Black Student Success Center to support Black faculty, staff and students. Plans also included launching a future study abroad program in Ghana; targeted support to Black students that are not currently connected to college programs; culturally responsive professional development for faculty; and a close examination of outcomes data to guide improvements in math and English success and transfer rates.

Mission College

This team developed plans for a Black Star Movement, inspired by the work of scholar Chike Akua,¹⁸ who lectured at the summit and whose ideas about building a sense of belonging for Black students resonated deeply. Elements of the movement include a cultural exchange with University of Ghana faculty, a push for the hiring of more black faculty and staff (the team reported

that Black people are now six of 441 faculty, one of 12 directors, one of 10 deans, and three of 100 classified), a Black writers symposium and professional development for faculty and staff.

Orange Coast College/Santa Monica College

A team of three student fellows across these two colleges co-founded a Black Student Artist Collective while at ADES aiming to foster community, creativity, unity, and collaboration. They plan for the collective to feature mentorships, including connecting students with industry professionals, and aim to uplift and promote Black voices and community. While in Ghana they captured video footage and developed a documentary film, *We Are The Chosen*, about the summit and outlined plans to create a “library of stories,” setting up an Instagram feed as well as a website—social platforms designed to connect Black youth and creatives, provide a space to share local resources and events, and offer an opportunity to showcase creative work. The BSA Collective also plans to seek funding from non-profits and foundation grants to support its work. In November 2024, the BSA Collective hosted “We Are the Chosen: A Night of Reflection” at OCC, premiering the documentary and launching a magazine and website to showcase “the beauty and brilliance of Black artistry and storytelling”—uplifting voices from ADES attendees and Ghanaian residents.

Southwestern College

This team focused squarely on low graduation and transfer rates for Black students, developing plans that centered on increasing success in mathematics—the primary hurdle—by reaching down into partner school districts to improve math education in elementary school. Additional elements included increasing federal Pell Grant receipt for eligible students and strengthening or building the Black Student Union, Umoja, as well as the Men-of-Color Program, among others.

West Valley College

This team developed plans for a Sankofa Circle Mentorship Program to build a sense of community in two-year cohorts that would feature structured, quarterly mentoring sessions with trained faculty, staff, alumni, and community members; celebrations of African culture; and support for academic success. They had already raised one-third of the \$30,000 they would need to support the rollout of the program, which would also include a trip to Ghana that would earn college credit, a free laptop computer, as well as a scholarship upon completion of the program.

Conclusion

What was invisible before our journey became vividly clear. The summit challenged educators, administrators, and leaders to leverage a transformational personal experience to improve their practice as professionals. The further challenge is to bring these improvements home to systems and institutions that have been historically resistant to change. Through powerful professional development, individuals were reset and renewed with approaches and frameworks that centered Black existence and belonging in higher education. For Black and African Diaspora educators, this requires ongoing, collective work together: How are we creating space for our community to feel empowered, to be authentic, to be unapologetically Black? For non-African Diaspora participants, this trip was the opportunity to deepen understanding of past and present and to identify new commitments to support their Black colleagues and students. Across all participants, ADES provided a spur to challenge the status quo, to show up differently, to reimagine and rebuild educational spaces that ensure Black student and educator success.

The challenge is to bring these improvements home to systems and institutions that have been historically resistant to change.

The ADES convening was a journey of the self as much as it was about interrogating existing institutional policies and practice, and understanding the promise of African-centered education.

Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research

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Wheelhouse was established in 2016 to support California community college leaders through annual professional learning institutes and independent, actionable research. Wheelhouse is supported by UC Davis, the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office) and private philanthropy.

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The authors are a team consisting of both Black African Diaspora scholars and practitioners and non-African Diaspora White scholars who attended the ADES Summit in Ghana in 2024. This brief is the product of close collaboration and contributions from all members of the authorship team. Our writing reflects our collective experience—a shared experience that has fueled our continued collaboration; our decidedly different experiences as Black and White participants, respectively; and, finally, our deeply personal experiences as individuals on this journey.

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