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## A Liberal Arts College Marks Five Years in Ghana

Patrick Awuah, Ashesi University's president, celebrated the fifth anniversary of Ghana's first liberal arts college this week in Seattle. After an eight-year career at Microsoft, Awuah, a native Ghanaian, founded Ashesi in 2002 with [this vision](#): "Imagine if every Sub-Saharan African country had several small liberal-arts colleges, educating students at a level equivalent to liberal-arts colleges in the United States — colleges dedicated to nurturing critical thinking, effective communication skills, practical experience, and a true concern for society in their students."

Ashesi's leaders have developed its core liberal arts curriculum with the help of faculty at Swarthmore College and the University of California at Berkeley (Awuah's alma maters), and the University of Washington. The university's enrollment has increased from 30 students in 2002 to about 400 today — 365 full-time students and 29 study abroad participants — and plans are in place for a permanent campus north of Accra on "a range of hills overlooking the capital." Awuah, who spoke at a [University of Washington panel discussion on the role of graduate education in nation building Monday](#), took time for a telephone interview with *Inside Higher Ed* this week about next steps for Ashesi and the role that liberal arts education can play in accelerating Africa's development.

**Q. Tell me about Ashesi, your mission and your focus. If you had the ear of a potential donor at a cocktail party for just two minutes, what would you most want them to know?**

**A.** Well, I would want them to know that Ashesi is about educating a new generation of leaders in Africa who think ethically and who are problem solvers and have the ability and the desire to confront problems on the continent.

**Q. And it has a liberal arts focus?**

**A.** Yes, I think that the liberal arts focus is probably the most important thing that we're doing at Ashesi and it's driven in part by my experiences at Swarthmore, but also comparing that with the experiences of my colleagues who were educated in Ghana for college. In Ghana the educational system is very heavily dependent on rote learning, just memorizing facts and repeating them to faculty. It does not prepare people to be problem-solvers. So what we're doing at Ashesi is trying to set this example that we hope others will follow, where the process of education should be about asking the right questions and looking at issues from multiple perspectives

and thinking critically and thinking analytically, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

**Q. What role do you see Ashesi playing in nation building? What role has it played so far and what role do you see it playing in the future?**

**A.** We hope to educate leaders who have a very high sense of integrity and empathy for their society and who also have a strong skill set in terms of conflict and problem solving skills that can be put to bear in their society in Africa. So this is going to be the most direct thing that we do is that our graduates are going to go out there and live and work in a certain way that can be impactful for Africa. We also hope that Ashesi sets an example for other institutions to follow so that there'll be an even bigger effect as other institutions pay more attention to educating people to think critically and ethically, that we then start to have a much broader impact on the continent.

So for me, I think of education as really doing two things. One is it builds individuals up, and they have a better life, a more rewarding life. But the second is that it builds these individuals up in a way, or it should build these individuals in a way, so they have a much bigger impact on the society around them. In Ghana and in a lot of Sub-Saharan African countries, very few people get to go to university, to college. And these people end up being the leaders in our society, not just political leaders, but the people who are running important institutions in our society — the engineers and the lawyers and the doctors and the policemen and the military officers and so on. We need to educate them in a way that they care about this society. I call it the “project of enlightenment.” That’s what education is about.

**Q. Ashesi has a threefold focus on scholarship, leadership and citizenship. On the latter point — citizenship — I saw that your faculty are evaluated in part for their role in pursuing development in Ghana and Africa, while students must fulfill a service learning requirement. What are the expectations for faculty and students on this front and how do you measure their success?**

**A.** Well, I'll start with the students. What we do with the students is we have them go through a leadership seminar series over the four years that they're at Ashesi. So each year, students participate in a leadership seminar. The first one is about what a great leader is, what a great leader does, does not do, what the attributes of great leadership are. The second seminar is about the good society and how you organize the political and judicial systems of the good society. The third has to do with how to organize the economy of the good society.... And the fourth is a seminar on leadership and service. In that seminar, we bring leaders from our community in Ghana to the classroom to speak with students and students go out and do community service. We encourage them to do things that leverage their particular skills. So for instance, students might go into a hospital and help them set up their information system, using the information systems skills that they've learned at Ashesi. Or they might go to an orphanage and help them with their

strategic planning and their financial systems, for instance. So we encourage them to go out and see what's going on, where the need is and make a meaningful contribution and then write papers reflecting on their experiences. We hope what this will do is it will get students to see first-hand just what an impact they can make, not only in business but generally in their community.

And with the faculty we encourage faculty as they're thinking about research and consulting jobs and so on to engage in matters that affect the poor, and to engage in ways that they're going to help build Ghana's economy in a meaningful way. This is the challenge that we've thrown to the students and the faculty.

And of course we encourage the Ashesi community as a whole to engage the question of what our good society should be at Ashesi, so that we have this college which in a sense is a lab. If we think through and we have a deep conversation about what we want our community to look like and how we want it to function, then we can project that as well outside of our walls.

**Q. Now that you've celebrated your five-year anniversary, where does Ashesi stand in terms of enrollment and your larger objectives? What are the plans for growth?**

**A.** What we've done over the last five years, we've focused on improving our model, the academic model and the financial model for the college. So we've rented some homes in a neighborhood in Accra and converted them to be used for academic work. In a sense, we've focused more on the software, the people, and not as much on building.

But we feel that we're in a pretty good place now. Tuition is covering about 80 percent of our ongoing operations, so it feels like and it looks like it's going to be sustainable just on financial terms. The academic model is working very well; our students are very sought-after in Ghanaian society, in corporate Ghana, and so we feel that this is a time to begin to do the work to expand. We've acquired 100 acres of land and we're now focused on raising the money to build our permanent campus and double the size.

For the first phase of our campus development, we would be looking to increase our population to 600 students — we were at 300 last year, we're now at 400 this year — and then we would grow that campus to a size of 2,000 students. Our model is that we have colleges that grow in size to about 1,500 to 2,000 students and we replicate so that any growth beyond 2,000 students would be done by setting up another smaller campus rather than building a big monolithic institution.

— Elizabeth Redden

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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