

From the issue dated November 5, 2004

A 'Swarthmore' Grows in Ghana

Unexpected wealth led an American-educated businessman to start a small private College

By WACHIRA KIGOTHO
Accra, Ghana

In 1985 Patrick Gyimah Awuah left Ghana to study engineering and economics on a scholarship to Swarthmore College. Within 12 years he had become one of many "Microsoft millionaires," ordinary employees who found themselves reaping unexpected gains on the stocks they bought when they joined the company.

Mr. Awuah, who felt tremendously grateful for the education he had received at Swarthmore, knew exactly what he wanted to do with his unexpected riches: start a college back home similar to his alma mater.

Ashesi University is the result of that vision. Only two years old, the small private college is already earning praise from academics abroad, as well as from education officials in Ghana. In a country where public universities are plagued by overcrowding and lack of resources, Ashesi is one of the few colleges with well-paid faculty members, uncrowded classrooms, and efficient classroom technology. In a recent report, the national university-accreditation board called it "one of Ghana's best new universities" and urged others to follow its example.

"I've been impressed since I arrived here," says Milton Krieger, a former professor of African studies at Western Washington University who teaches African politics at Ashesi and has been a visiting research fellow at several other African universities. "To my understanding, there is no other university in Ghana, and probably just a handful of others in sub-Saharan Africa, that can match the learning environment and quality of education at Ashesi."

Mr. Awuah, who is president of the university, says his goal is simple: to develop an academically strong institution that will train a new generation of ethical, business-savvy leaders in Africa. "We need Africa entrepreneurs and business leaders who can emulate Southeast Asian economic tigers," he says.

Calm Amid Chaos

As the temperature reaches the high 80s on a humid September day in Accra, the capital of Ghana, the city center is a jumble of traffic jams, street vendors, and decaying slums with open sewer trenches. Located inside a nearby compound, Ashesi's quiet campus seems worlds away from the chaos as students work on their assignments in comfortable, air-conditioned computer laboratories.

The scene is rare enough in Ghana, where computers are almost nonexistent on college campuses. But Ashesi's 150 students are equally unusual. They come from upper-class families. Few others in Ghana, where the annual per-capita income is \$400, can afford the \$4,800 it costs each year for tuition, room, and board. They are also equal parts pragmatic, idealistic, and ambitious.

Debbie Antiaye, a sophomore computer-science major, says her goal is to earn an M.B.A. in order to create a company that will enable Ghanaian craftsmen and female traders to sell their products outside the country. She came up with the idea after completing a community-service requirement for a course in entrepreneurship, which led her to a nongovernmental organization that works with women in Accra who sell textiles and food at

open-air markets.

Henry Sampson, also a sophomore studying computer science, plans to earn his Ph.D. in aeronautics at an American university. "If we in Africa want to succeed, we should aim high and work hard," he says.

The students' focus on academic work stands in sharp contrast to a scene just a few miles away at the University of Ghana, where angry students are staging rallies to protest an increase in tuition. Most African universities are highly politicized. Students boycott classes to express their frustration at being forced to pay for overcrowded lecture halls and substandard housing. Lecturers strike frequently in an effort to raise their meager salaries or force the university to give them long-overdue paychecks.

African governments often have few resources to devote to higher education. Since 1990, enrollment at Ghana's five public universities has jumped from 12,000 to 65,000 students. At the University of Ghana alone, enrollment has risen from 7,500 to 25,000 students, while its physical facilities have stayed largely the same.

Mr. Awuah was well aware of the crisis in African higher education when he first thought up the idea of Ashesi, which means "beginning." From the start he knew he wanted to create something different from the large, bureaucratic institutions that have come to define the university experience for so many students on the continent. Instead, he envisioned a college similar to Swarthmore, with a curriculum grounded in the liberal arts, where professors would talk to students, not at them.

A software engineer and program manager by profession, Mr. Awuah, now 39, decided to prepare for what he saw as his life's mission by enrolling in the M.B.A. program at the University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business in 1997.

"I had to evaluate the feasibility of this goal," he explains, "and to gain a broader range of managerial skills required of a college president."

While at Berkeley, he persuaded a group of fellow students to help him study the possibility of setting up a private university in Ghana. The team spent several weeks in the country conducting surveys and holding focus groups with high-school students, teachers, principals, business leaders, and government education officials.

International Advisers

Convinced that the need -- and the interest -- was there, Mr. Awuah returned to Berkeley to lay the foundation for the new university. In 1999 he and another student, Nina Marini, an American, established the Ashesi University Foundation in Seattle.

From the beginning, says Mr. Awuah -- who has donated some \$500,000 to Ashesi -- he felt it was important to recruit academics in the United States to help him create the new institution. The foundation, which serves as the nerve center for Ashesi's fund-raising operations and curriculum development, is spearheaded by a team of academics and business professionals, assisted by about 40 academic advisers from Swarthmore, Berkeley, and the University of Washington. The foundation is also advised by a committee of academics and business leaders in Ghana.

Together, the group devised a small, highly focused curriculum unlike that found at most private universities in sub-Saharan Africa. Ashesi offers only two bachelor's degrees -- in computer science and in business administration -- anchored by a strong liberal-arts foundation. Swarthmore faculty members helped develop the liberal-arts curriculum; Berkeley professors helped develop the business program, and University of Washington professors helped create the computer-science program.

Mr. Awuah says corruption has killed initiative in Africa, and that has led him to make ethics a central part of the liberal-arts program. Themes related to the pitfalls of corruption, nepotism, and tribalism and the value of community service have been woven into the course work.

Technology is also integrated into the curriculum. For instance, students use computers to run games that simulate how economic markets behave.

The university, which has an annual budget of \$800,000 derived from tuition and donor support, has aggressively recruited top professors from around the region. The dean of academics, Nana Apt, is the former head of the sociology department at the University of Ghana. Sitsofe Anku, a mathematics professor, is a Ghanaian academic who used to work for the World Bank as a higher-education consultant. Ashesi's faculty includes lecturers and professors from Britain, Ghana, South Africa, and the United States.

While the university's success depends in part on money -- it pays faculty members twice the going salary in Ghana -- it has also lured plenty of people attracted by its high standards.

"I have always cared about quality, and Patrick shares that vision," says Mr. Anku.

Mr. Awuah is now encouraging American professors to teach at Ashesi during the summer term and has already recruited visiting lecturers from Yale, Swarthmore, and Western Washington University.

He is also talking with universities in the United States and Europe about developing semester-abroad programs at Ashesi. New York University was one of the first to agree, and sent 25 students here this fall to study business, African traditional medicine, sociology, and African history. Western Washington University recently made Ashesi its official study-abroad partner institution in West Africa. Western Washington's first batch of students is expected next spring.

Although the majority of Ashesi's students are from Ghana, it has also attracted students from Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, among other African countries.

Many students say they were drawn to Ashesi after having negative experiences elsewhere in the African higher-education system. Ebenezer Onofurho, a business-administration major from Nigeria, suffered through a lecturer's strike at the University of Benin, which resulted in the institution's shutting down for six months, before enrolling in Ashesi.

"I asked my family to allow me to join Ashesi, and they agreed. And now it seems to be one of the best decisions I have made in my life," says Mr. Onofurho, who hopes to set up an information-technology company in Benin City.

Students praise Ashesi's small classes and the regular communication with their professors.

One recent afternoon Ms. Apt led a class of 20 students in a lively discussion about the empowerment of women in Ghana. The conversation touched on the many ways in which students had witnessed gender discrimination in Africa and segued into the emerging problem of sexual trafficking of young girls.

"You see," said Ms. Apt, with a voice that bestowed confidence in her students, "I did not have to lecture to you as if you were not aware of what is happening around you."

At many public universities, by contrast, it is common to see professors giving rote lectures to hundreds of students, many of whom must stand outside packed auditoriums, in the hallways.

"Here we get the attention we deserve, and lecturers are always available to assist us," says Linda Fiah, a senior and one of Ms. Apt's students.

Black and White

Mr. Awuah's next goal is to expand Ashesi further. He has already bought 100 acres of prime land on a hill at Berekuso, 15 miles from Accra, to build a new campus. The Ashesi University Foundation has raised more than \$3-million of the \$15-million needed to build a campus complete with lecture halls, student and faculty housing, and administrative facilities. The money has come from individual donors and major corporations, such as Microsoft, Boeing, and Barclays Global Investors.

The university hopes to expand its enrollment to 450 in a couple of years, and 1,500 in 10 years. So far the only

barrier to reaching that goal, administrators say, is the cost of tuition. They soon hope to establish a scholarship fund to draw in needy students.

Mr. Awuah sees himself as a modern-day James Emmanuel Kwegyir Aggrey, an early-20th-century Ghanaian educator and missionary who graduated from Livingstone College, in North Carolina. Mr. Aggrey returned to Ghana to play a major role in shaping education in sub-Saharan Africa as a member of the Phelps-Stokes Commission, an international effort to encourage colonial governments to improve education for Africans.

Mr. Awuah likes to recite one of his role model's more famous lines: "You can play a tune of sorts on the white keys, and you can play a tune of sorts on the black keys, but for harmony you must use both the black and white keys."

"Africa," says Mr. Awuah, "must be integrated with the rest of the world if the continent is to play a vital role in the world stage."

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: International

Volume 51, Issue 11, Page A36

Copyright © 2004 by The Chronicle of Higher Education