

My name is Fehintola Elizabeth Bright-Awonuga. I am a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) double majoring in Public Health (with a Health Policy concentration) and in Africana Studies. I am a second-generation Nigerian-American and a Pan-African at heart. I aspire to integrate my double major to impact and aid the community health development of local, national, and global underserved communities. I remember freshman year, there was a study abroad information session at the “Commons Main Street.” I was taken away by all the amazing opportunities. I took a bunch of fliers, pamphlets, and booklets and stashed them in my bookbag. However, I was caught aback by the price of the programs. Still, I made a promise to myself Freshman year that before I graduate university I would study abroad and not have to worry about expenses getting in the way.

In that moment, as a freshman, I reflected on my High School experience. I remembered an experience I had in high school that still stays with me to this day. As a senior in high school, I spent a lot of time applying to scholarships because I couldn't afford to pay out of pocket for college. Instead of working, my parents encouraged me to make applying to scholarships my “full time job.” So that is what I did. I spent a lot of my free time looking for and applying to as many scholarships as I could. I remembered during free hour in one of my classes, I had a school faculty member approach me and accuse my efforts of applying to scholarships as being related to plagiaristic acts. They accused me of looking up essays to “copy and paste” and act as if it were my own work. My countless sleepless nights were equated, falsely, to being a simple click of a button that allowed me to obtain certain verbiage and potency of language. My efforts to succeed were belittled and I was looked down upon. I was *too hard working*, *too focused*, and *too determined*. My actions didn't align with who I was (looked like). I didn't fit the norm. I questioned, was it because of my age or my skin color? Maybe it was the fact that I didn't fit the stereotypes of a young black student — statistically unsuccessful. As a young black female, society continues to attempt to limit my efforts. “Be realistic. You're a double minority: black and female. And you are young! C'mon. Ha. In this world, you'll never make it.” This societal phantom whispered, tugged at my heart, and caused uncertainty in self. I questioned, “is it enough?” But I will always remember, a wise person once said, “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example (1 Timothy 4:12).” Because of my reaffirmation of confidence and knowing my true self and identity, I left high school and continued in college in obtaining over thirty different scholarships and am now graduating, on what I call, “an unconventional full ride scholarship experience” — no debt or loans acquired, just scholarships and grants.

As a freshman in university, standing in the “Commons Main Street”, this strong memory encouraged me that if I did it before, I can do it again. So, I made a promise to myself that before I graduate university I would study abroad, regardless of the then current financial limitations. Now, as a senior in college, I can proudly say that I will be studying abroad, in Spring 2022, at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra to study Twi and Global Health Policy. On top of that, I can say that my entire study abroad experience is fully funded. I have been awarded three nationally competitive and prestigious scholarships to use towards my study abroad experience. First, I have been awarded the National Security Education Program (NSEP) David L. Boren Scholarship, secondly, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, and thirdly, the Fund for Education Abroad (FEA) NAFSA Tamara H. Bryant Memorial Scholarship. I am beyond grateful for not only this opportunity, but the awards I have received! It took a lot of hard work, dedication, and discipline to apply and be consistent. But I can honestly say that it was worth it because now I am fulfilling my promise to myself!

This ISEP-Ghana study abroad program offers me a global experience that is holistic in learning new languages and cultures, honing in on academic interests, and building connections with a lifelong cohort across the globe and on the continent of Alkebulan (“Africa”). I am a firm believer that the best policies are made when one can, firstly, understand, communicate, and listen unequivocally to the people who are being impacted and, secondly, translate this discourse into beneficial community policies. Nelson Mandela once said, “If you talk to a man in a language he

understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in *his* language, that goes to his heart.” This is one of the main reasons why I am excited to learn the Ghanaian language of Twi and study Global Health Policy because it will provide me with the cross-cultural skills to succeed in my current and future educational and career experiences. This study abroad experience will provide me a cross-cultural experience in which I could utilize my “global bridge-building” mindset and ensure the transference of cultural knowledge by creating the push forward of shared language and experiences between global citizens of the world. This program will allow me to build on my previous experiences and will support my future goals by providing me with the tools to learn how to create African solutions for African problems through increased language acquisition, cultural knowledge, and a culturally immersed first-hand experience of African education, health, life, and culture.

With all of that being said, I can proudly and boldly say that nationwide I am a “1 in 24” FEA Scholar, “top 20%” Boren Scholar, and a Gilman Scholar. Nationwide, I am a “1 in 24” of a pool of over 1,250 applicants for the FEA Scholar, “1 out of 188” from 626 undergraduate applications for the Boren Scholar, and a recipient for the Gilman Scholarship which only awards 1 in 4 scholarships. To even say that I am one of them, but even all of them is a testament in and of itself of how hard I work towards my goals and future. My desire to mold communities that are better educated, better expressed and better served has fueled this experience — giving back what has been given unto me.

On one final note, I will always remember and hold dear to my heart President Freeman Hrabowski’s recitation of the Langston Hughes poem phrase: “*Hold fast to dreams, For if dreams die, Life is a broken-winged bird, That cannot fly.*” No matter the barrier standards of society, I am going to give back what has been given unto me because of the people, the plan, and the purpose. My education continues to take me on a journey that is shaping my future self. Along this railroad, my track, I have encountered people who have both supported me and doubted me.

For those who still or ever doubted me — because of age, gender, race, etc. — I have one thing to say:

I am not just a scholar student. I am not just a child who wishes to please her parents while pondering to find herself. I am not just a sibling who acts as the shepherd to lead her flock on the right path. I am me. I am me and in me, I am “I”, and I am all the things that my God and my destiny have deemed me to be. So don’t you ever underestimate my capabilities, ‘cuz I’ll only surprise you even more.

For those who have supported me and will support me, I say:

Let’s continue to pick up the puzzle pieces and create the tracks that will lead us to our pursuit of happiness. We have the opportunity to make a difference in the world. My education is the opportunity that will take me there. I dream big, plan big, and put even bigger faith in those willing to help me succeed. Working as a team means having a collective vision, purpose, and focus. You all have supported my vision and pushed me towards my purpose. And for that, I say thank you.