

Path to a New Africa

To change Africa's future, we must change the mindset of young Africans in college today **BY PATRICK AWUAH**

TO SEE A SNAPSHOT of what an African country will look like in 20 years, sit in a college class there today. Africa's future progress, or the lack of it, is inextricably linked to what is happening in African universities. Let me explain with a statistic. Only 5 percent of the young people in sub-Saharan Africa attend college. This percentage is so small that you can be sure that those few Africans in college will, by definition, be running the show in 20 or 30 years. The upcoming leaders in business and government—the professionals, engineers, and managers who will be responsible for tomorrow's infrastructure, education, health care, and other sectors—are sitting in a college classroom today.

Consider then, in the near future, whether this influential 5 percent will play a positive role in creating a healthier, more productive, and more just future for Africa. Will they have strong ethics and a concern for the greater good, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, or class? Will they be innovative thinkers, ready to develop creative solutions? Will they have an entrepreneurial mindset, ready to work hard and help Africa's private sector thrive?

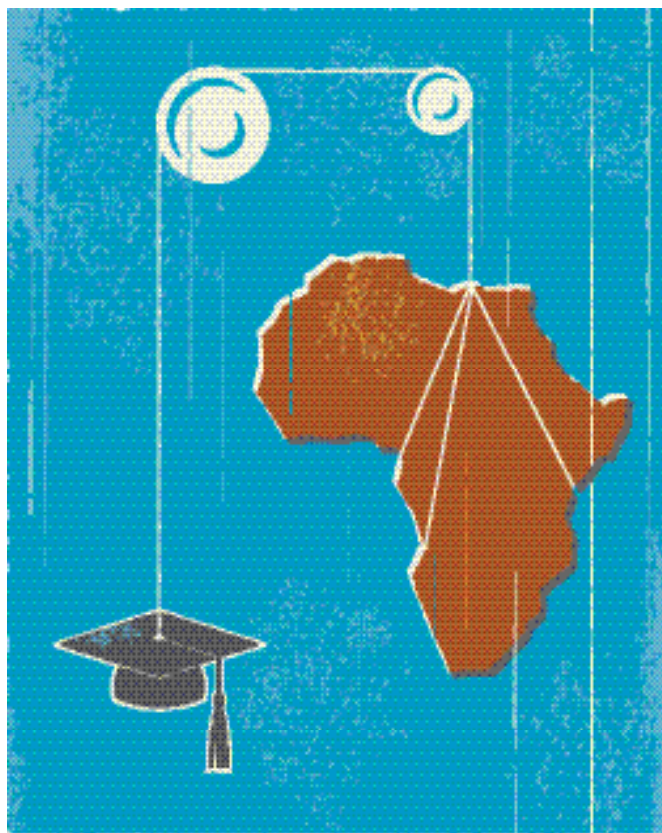
Or, will the world watch as Africa's next influential 5 percent remain a leadership cohort plagued by corruption and inefficiency?

I grew up during Ghana's chaotic military dictatorship. The economy was so dysfunctional that finding food was a daily challenge for most families, including mine. It was illegal at one point for businesses to make a profit, or even to have a substantial inventory of goods. The result: huge shortages of goods, and an economy with no buffer against declines in agricultural output. When I earned a scholarship to Swarthmore College, a new way of questioning, developing, and testing ideas was revealed to me. I majored in engineering, but also was challenged and enriched by liberal arts classes. When I was recruited to work at Microsoft, I turned my back on Africa.

Later, when my first child was born in Seattle, I understood that Africa mattered—to me, to my son, and to the world. But like so many others who wish to create progress in Africa, my first question was "Where should I begin?"

I left my successful US career and returned to Africa. I considered starting a software company, but realized that my peers who had studied programming in Africa had learned to code on paper, without a chance to develop their ideas on computers. I investigated local challenges—neighborhoods without water, high unemployment, swelling slums, dysfunctional hospitals. And for each problem, I asked myself "Why?" And for every answer, I had another question: "But why is that?" A pattern emerged: underlying

PATRICK AWUAH is the founder and president of Ashesi University in Ghana. Founded in 2002, Ashesi's mission is to educate ethical, entrepreneurial leaders in Africa.



every challenge were people in positions of responsibility who were neither fixing problems nor creating solutions. Very few seemed to care, and even those who did were resigned to the status quo.

When I asked my peers what should be done, they shrugged. Their reaction led me to explore the educational system, which looked grim. Africa's universities are overcrowded and underfunded. Students line up hours before class, hoping for a seat. Students learn a narrow subject matter, and are tested on recall. Academic dishonesty is too common. How can Africa's future leaders possibly learn to think and behave differently if we don't educate them in a different way? If we want different results, we must try something different. Clearly, Africa needed a new kind of university, and in 2000 I resolved to create it.

THE GOAL OF LASTING PROGRESS

Five years later, Ashesi University in Ghana began classes. With generous support and

input from Swarthmore, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Washington, Ashesi designed a curriculum that combined elements of a traditional liberal arts college with world-class majors in business and technology—very different from the African norm. To fight corruption, we created a mandatory four-year leadership seminar series designed to instill ethics and a commitment to the greater good.

One early supporter wondered if a vocational school might be more “appropriate” for Africa. But Africa’s business leaders told us that what they urgently needed, and could not find, were trustworthy employees who could “think outside the box,” who could handle complex, real-world problems, and who had strong leadership and communication skills. In response, Ashesi’s business and computer science classes emphasize analytics and critical thinking, and we use community service and in-depth senior projects to challenge students to address local complexities.

We convinced the national accreditation board to approve this innovative curriculum. The board, following the prevailing African model, thought students should take classes only in their field of study, such as engineering or business, rather than “waste” students’ time with leadership seminars. We also lived our values. We refused to pay bribes. Bribe seekers always left empty-handed.

Our biggest obstacle was a lack of funds. Decision makers at one American foundation after another declined to invest in our unproven model. Africa had so many needs—could a new college, even one with a transformative curriculum, really be a priority? Could any college instill ethical leadership and innovative thinking? Could a small project have an impact? And wouldn’t this experiment take years to show results? Luckily, a few farsighted donors responded to my vision and agreed to take a risk.

Ashesi (pronounced Ah-SHESS-ee) launched with 30 students, half of whom received need-based scholarships. Only 27 percent were women. Classes met in a crowded rented house in Accra. Today, Ashesi—which means “beginning” in a local language—has grown to about 550 students toward our target of 2,000. Half of our students are women; many receive financial aid. Tuition from students who can afford it now covers annual operating expenses. This frees us to leverage donors’ funds to build new facilities, develop new programs, and fund scholarships. Relying on tuition—African capital paid by African families—has challenged us to understand, and meet, the needs of local employers, students, and parents.

Of our 369 graduates, more than 95 percent choose to stay in Africa. By contrast, one-third of African professionals have emigrated in recent decades. And all Ashesi graduates—100 percent—have quickly found quality jobs. As our graduates apply their new skills and new approaches in Africa, they establish the validity of our model—that a transformative higher education, focused on ethical leadership and innovative thinking, is a leveraged path to a new Africa.

To those who questioned if college can foster ethics and civic engagement, I’m pleased to report that every year Ashesi graduates choose to join nonprofit or social venture teams, often in leadership positions, and employers rate Ashesi graduates more ethical than their peers.

In 2008, after years of debate, Ashesi students voted to launch Africa’s only student-led honor code. Now, before each exam, students

sign a pledge not to cheat and to report dishonest behavior. Exams are generally not proctored. Strong peer pressure and collective pride are an effective motivator. “If we fail at this,” one student leader said, “we will have proved to the world that Africans can never be ethical.”

When a government board found our honor code so implausible that they considered withdrawing our accreditation, I was nervous. Despite the risk, Ashesi students voted unanimously to persist, and wrote more than 100 letters to defend their code.

Are our graduates able to uphold their high ethical standards in the outside world? Each year, Ashesi alumni return to campus to share specific, personal examples of being invited to join corrupt schemes. These alumni tell current students how they successfully chose the ethical path, sometimes turning down a great deal of money.

CHANGING AFRICA’S FUTURE

“At Ashesi,” one graduate explained, “we develop an antennae for problems to solve and things to improve.” Because of this approach, each Ashesi graduate is affecting dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of lives. For example, Aba Ackun, a former scholarship student, is now a regional credit risk manager for Acción International, a global microfinance organization. After graduating, Ackun won awards and broke boundaries as a woman working in the Ghanaian offices of Barclays and Newmont Mining before choosing to apply her skills to microfinance. She is now improving Acción’s ability to help impoverished families across six African countries, while maintaining Acción’s economic stability.

Africa needs homegrown, local talent like Ackun to solve today’s problems and prevent tomorrow’s catastrophes. Examples abound. Our graduates have developed financial products for mobile phones. They are working in Africa’s emerging finance sector, attracting needed capital for local ventures. And since African businesses must be run to higher standards of transparency to qualify for capital, Ashesi graduates, as consultants, are teaching them how. Some graduates travel across Africa helping NGOs scale up. Overall, Ashesi graduates are developing multiple paths to prosperity for Africa’s poor and middle class.

In August 2011, thanks to generous donors, Ashesi inaugurated its new campus, designed and built by Africans and delivered on schedule and on budget. Our keynote speaker, John Dramani Mahama, vice president of Ghana, urged other universities to follow our model of teaching critical thinking skills. Our once-controversial curriculum is now acknowledged to be what Africa needs.

I’m honored when I’m invited to speak at conferences and grateful for Ashesi’s growing reputation. But Africa needs even more from Ashesi, and needs more institutions like Ashesi. With help from funders, we have ambitious plans to expand our student body, to leverage our strengths by adding new majors in high-impact fields such as engineering and economics, and to become more pan-African.

Sitting in Africa’s classrooms today are students whose education will set Africa’s course over the next 20 to 30 years. When more African universities follow Ashesi’s model, we will see a better future for Africa and for the world. ■