Scholars Program

Institutional Change-Making to Advance Equitable Outcomes for and with Youth

Insights and Examples from the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program
# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary**  
3

**Background**  
4

**Case Examples**

Case I. Ashesi University:  
*Scaling Student Supports*  
5

Case II. Carnegie Mellon University Africa:  
*Building a Culture of Giving Back to the Community*  
8

**Conclusions**  
11

**Acknowledgements**  
11

---

In partnership with

---

Scholars Program | Institutional Change-Making to Advance Equitable Outcomes for and with Youth
The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program’s vision is a transformative network of young people and institutions driving inclusive and equitable socioeconomic change in Africa. Its goal is to ignite the exceptional and exponential potential of young people in Africa by working with institutions, ecosystem actors, and Scholars to create the conditions that will enable young people to attain inclusive and relevant education, transition smoothly into dignified and fulfilling work, and lead transformative lives. Achieving this vision and goal requires transformation of partner institutions to be more inclusive of non-traditional students and more relevant and better placed to prepare young people for work and life. It involves changing policies and practices within institutions themselves.

This document summarizes two concrete examples of institutional change led or inspired by the Scholars Program in partner institutions. While the cases have many features in common, the descriptions focus on different aspects to provide a sense of the range of institutional change possibilities. In both cases, the situation posing a need or opportunity to advance programmatic goals for impact at scale is described, followed by a summary of the program’s role in promoting change, the conditions that encouraged the change, the challenges impeding the efforts, and considerations for practitioners and leaders trying to influence institutional change as well as for their funders.

There are a multitude of institutional changes happening across the Scholars Program; the ones spotlighted here are simply a selection. They were collected through a focus group that took place virtually in 2020 with staff working for the Scholars Program at a cross-section of five institutions, representing a mix of public and private universities in West and East Africa as well as one in Scotland and one in Canada. At Ashesi University, the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program has enabled the university to incubate student supports and other practices that then were scaled up to the wider student body of the university. At Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), the Program has contributed to building a culture of give-back among the student body.

One key theme that is evident across stories is that building trusting relationships is central not only to the successful implementation of the Program but also for the scaling of program practices. Implementing partners interface extensively with peers and other departments within their own institutions. They also engage with their local communities and larger national or regional ecosystem. For instance, relationships with others in their institution as well as external non-governmental, community-based, and educational organizations are all important as they set up well-conceptualized, targeted, and transparent recruitment and selection policies and processes. Partners model respect and inclusion and build alliances to help overlooked young people realize their potential and demonstrate the benefits of ensuring fair opportunity.

Other common themes include the need for flexibility, for resourcing to support institutional change efforts, for leadership development, and for ways to document, track, and reflect on institutional change. To help ensure institutional change goals and plans continue to develop, it may be useful to incorporate structured program planning, progress reporting, and joint review between implementers and funders.
BACKGROUND

The Mastercard Foundation believes that all young people, no matter their starting point in life, should have an equal chance to obtain a quality education and pursue their aspirations. As of 2022, the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program has provided education and leadership development for over 41,000 bright young leaders with a deep personal commitment to changing the world around them and improving the lives of others. This is expected to grow to 100,000 by 2030. Through a network of universities and non-governmental organizations, the Scholars Program ensures that students whose academic talent and promise exceed their financial resources are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and networks they need to become transformative leaders.

In addition to fostering transformative leadership in young people, the Program also seeks to leverage institutions as leaders in fostering transformation. By collaborating closely with each other, and intentionally engaging in learning and knowledge mobilization, implementing partners can transform their own institutions in ways that promote the education, leadership development, and transition to work of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as influence other actors that may have an impact on youth outcomes.

Institutional transformation contributions by implementing partners are multi-faceted and may entail:

- Institutionalizing programmatic changes such as the adoption, revision, or expansion of leadership, educational, and employment programs;
- Initiating policy changes, for example revising recruitment strategies and admissions criteria to attract qualified disadvantaged students; and
- Making changes in practice so that institutions focus on ensuring that existing programs and policies are implemented in ways that result in the outcomes envisioned.

The Foundation specifies core program components that are expected at each institution, but partners have flexibility in the implementation, and they can innovate in light of local assets, challenges, needs, and opportunities. As implementing partners create culturally and contextually appropriate adaptations of each program component from recruitment to alumni support, they are also expected to seek out opportunities to make institutional changes that advance program outcomes at scale.

1. The tertiary institutions that are part of the program are: African Institute for Mathematical Sciences; African Leadership Academy; African Leadership University; American University of Beirut; Arizona State University; Ashesi University; Carnegie Mellon University; Duke University; EARTH University; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology; Makerere University; McGill University; Queen’s University; Sciences Po; Stanford University; United States International University-Africa; University of Abomey-Calavi; University of British Columbia; University of California, Berkeley; University of Cape Town; University of Edinburgh; University of Gondar; University of Pretoria; University of Toronto; Wellesley College. The secondary education partners are: BRAC Uganda; Campaign for Female Education (CAMPED); Equity Group Foundation; Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).
CASE I. ASHESI UNIVERSITY: SCALING STUDENT SUPPORTS

Situation

Ashesi University is a private, not-for-profit institution in Ghana, whose goal is to educate African leaders of exceptional integrity and professional ability. Its mission includes promoting students’ well-being within a safe environment. Attracting students from a range of geographies and backgrounds, university staff have seen a need for a range of psychological support and consultation services. Efforts to further diversify the student body, bolstered in large part by the recruitment for the Scholars Program, have led to the inclusion of students from economically impoverished and other low-resource high-stress home areas.

Change inspired by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program has enabled Ashesi to incubate practices that then were scaled up to the wider student body of the university. For example, the Program has introduced a variety of student supports aimed at monitoring Scholar adjustment and helping to curb self-isolation and self-exclusion observed among many Scholars who were finding it hard to adapt to university life. In a bid to encourage their holistic health and well-being more broadly, the Scholars Program helped inspire the university’s Office of Student & Community Affairs to provide counselling, coaching, and academic advising services (CCA) for the entire student body. The Scholars Program’s attention to supporting career planning and intensifying outreach to potential internship providers contributed to a similar increase in career counselling for Ashesi students. As volume increased, the roll-out resulted in the growth of the counselling team to include the Counselling Coaching and Academic Advisory Team (CCA), which became an expert resource for the entire campus. For the student body, the policies adopted (e.g., requirement that all incoming students meet with a counsellor) contributed to early identification of needs and closer monitoring of progress. Additionally, Ashesi believes health-seeking behaviour and de-stigmatization of mental health concerns improved across the university.

Furthermore, the efforts that Ashesi has put into enabling Scholars to give back, explore entrepreneurship, and create innovative solutions to problems that they identify in communities (e.g., through the Scholars Entrepreneurship Fund) have attracted additional funding that has allowed the university to expand these opportunities to other students beyond Scholars.
What activities and conditions contributed to achieving the institutional changes?

Among the many contributors to realizing these institutional changes, we note several important factors:

- The Scholars Program staffing was integrated across the Ashesi campus. The size and level of this integration creates influence opportunities, supporting the innovative culture at Ashesi.

- Extensive networking among peers in administrative, academic, and executive leadership departments helped cultivate program champions with first-hand knowledge of successful activities.

- The leadership orientation to continuous improvement and campus reputation for innovation, modest scale, and responsive decision-making processes kept programming and resource allocation nimble and flexible. When the merits of an approach were demonstrated, actions could be taken relatively quickly.

- The program’s active “Measurement, Evaluation, Research, and Learning” plan involves extensive documentation to assess program benefits and inform influence activities. The program frequently works with staff from other departments to collect information on both Scholars and their non-scholarship peers to facilitate comparisons and assess program benefits. The close collaboration with non-Scholars Program staff helps spread ideas and encourage innovation.

- Demonstrating the feasibility of outreach partnering practices with compelling anecdotes and follow-up data on specific program components strengthens the case. For example, reviews of student stories pointed to the important role of psychosocial support in promoting Scholars’ timely graduation. As the department strengthened its counselling offerings, the demand grew organically beyond the Scholars and the university responded by allocating resources.

- Scholars’ success after graduating is convincing. While Ashesi University reports a high post-graduation success rate, the Scholars have demonstrated slightly higher rates of employment and entrepreneurial success. This has been attributed on campus to the intensive transitions supports offered to them. For instance, the four-year Career Curriculum initially introduced under the Scholars Program was designed to help Scholars build a robust career plan including goals and supports for their transition into the world of work. The curriculum has since become a major component of Ashesi’s Career Development programs as it has proven useful and well received by students as they navigate their chosen career paths.

- Scholars’ give-back and other entrepreneurial activities attracted attention in the community and facilitated the obtention of in-kind and funding contributions that made opportunities previously limited to Scholars available to a greater number of students.
What challenges obstructed these institutional change efforts?

- There is a need to overcome internal communication barriers to promote awareness of the Program among staff and leaders not connected with the Program.
- There is not always enough useful comparison data and collecting and analysing new data in a busy environment is time- and energy-intensive.
- Talking about value-add of programming can be seen as a criticism of potential allies among co-workers in other parts of the institution, and alliances must be built to try to circumvent that.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS, LEADERS AND THEIR FUNDERS

- Begin developing working relationships across the institution, setting aside time to collaborate and promoting awareness of inclusion and equity-seeking practices (such as those implemented in the Scholars Program) so that others will be inspired by the approach and results.
- Early in the life of a program, invest program and staff development resources in monitoring and evaluation to set up systems for data collection that will support eventual influence efforts.
- Consider how to engage with employers, government bodies, and other institutions with similar goals and values to promote awareness and secure resources.

Gervase Adams, a Scholars Program alum from Ashesi University, pitches his social venture, the Komaale Initiative, at the first Baobab Summit in 2016.

Credit: Illume
CASE II. CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY AFRICA (CMU-Africa): BUILDING A CULTURE OF GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Situation

Born out of a partnership between Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), which is based in Pittsburgh, USA, and the Government of Rwanda, CMU-Africa is addressing the critical shortage of high-quality engineering talent required to accelerate development in Africa. Established in Kigali in 2011, its mission is to produce creative and technically strong engineers, who have been trained in the African context and are prepared to make transformative impact in their communities and the world. The talented graduates of CMU-Africa play a strategic role in Africa’s trajectory, leveraging Information Communication Technology (ICT) to address challenges to growth and digitally leapfrog socioeconomic development both locally and across the continent.

Change inspired by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program

Establishing a culture wherein each student contributes to community improvement efforts as a healthy, productive change-maker is a central goal shared by the Scholars Program and CMU-Africa. Lack of community engagement, along with concerns about wellness and mental health among highly stressed university students, have come under increased scrutiny in recent years. Ivory tower separations from practical problem-solving and the lack of experience making real world change can create a gap that is difficult for some graduates to overcome.

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program emphasizes recruiting Scholars who show leadership potential and commitment to giving back to their communities. Consequently, the number of CMU-Africa Scholars in leadership positions on campus has grown with the Program. Their presence is felt in different capacities around campus, influencing the experience for all students. For example, Scholars took on the organization of Giving Tuesday, a day when faculty, staff, students, and alumni across all locations give back by financially supporting students through donations. Through their active example and passionate advocacy, Scholars have helped foster a sense of duty, possibility, and excitement among students and alumni, helping make community engagement part of CMU-Africa campus culture.
What activities and conditions contributed to achieving the institutional changes?

Among the many contributors to realizing these institutional changes, we note several important factors:

- Selection of applicants who have demonstrated engagement with their community (as identified through interviews) increases the likelihood that the Scholars will voluntarily apply themselves to address community needs wherever they reside.
- Transformative leadership training and required experiential learning opportunities through internships combine to help prepare Scholars as advocates for themselves and others.
- The Scholars Program nurtures the Scholars’ passion to contribute to the advancement of their communities. Many Scholars have been active in student governance, and their positions as student leaders have helped them in pushing their give-back agenda to the entire community. As a result, innovative practices such as the give-back component of the Scholars Program have come to the attention of faculty and administrators, and have introduced other students to a greater culture of giving back in which both formal requirements and social norms encourage volunteerism.
- The introduction of additional requirements on top of academic and other demands was eased somewhat by the engagement of Scholar voice alongside administrators and faculty.

What challenges obstructed these institutional change efforts?

- Mastercard Foundation Scholars face competing demands due to their intense workload and the nature of the program. Scholars have a lot of work and sometimes it has not been easy to motivate them to be part of other activities within the university.
- Some activities have to be limited to Scholars because of lack of financial resources to support participation by all.
- There isn’t a central place of coordination on campus for leadership-building efforts.
- Transformative leadership on campus builds strong leadership among graduates. Authentic empowerment of students means that institutional leaders have to let go of control and may potentially find themselves becoming the target of student advocacy efforts.
CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS, LEADERS AND THEIR FUNDERS

- Make leadership training available to as many young people as possible at the institution.

- Engage with other staff involved in student governance and other student organizations. Explore innovations that bring disparate programming together and connect like-minded staff.

- Look for ways to promote practice on and off campus. Partners can leverage nearby experiential learning opportunities to practice leadership, thus furthering mission-consistent changes. Also leverage student organizations that have reach off campus.

- Stay connected with student leaders and alumni wherever possible. Provide leadership development and invite feedback. While an empowered, activated student body can be unpredictable, their experience on campus is often a vital predictor of their impact off campus.

Credit: Illume

Jobe Wuyeh, a CMU-Africa Scholars Program alum with a master’s in Information Technology, shares his learning journey.
CONCLUSION

By design, implementing partners across the Scholars Program pursue their goals through both individual Scholar achievements and the influence exerted to improve higher education. Scholars themselves and implementing partners have roles to play as transformative leaders in the socio-economic transformation of Africa by modelling, catalysing, and informing change in the higher education ecosystem.

The two institutional stories selected here stand in place of others that could have been examined and those that will follow. Together they suggest a range of goals and strategies — some pointing to educator-led organizational change and others pointing to student advocacy. Each story, though, points to the value of preparation for intentional and opportunistic change, as well as reflection and ongoing leadership development.

These cases suggest that it takes collaboration and time for implementing partners to effectively pursue institutional change. Yet, even new Programs can begin to prepare for both planned and opportunistic change. These early adopter Programs focused first on the activities integral to meeting Scholars’ immediate needs. In doing so, they built their networks, assessed the challenges, and identified how they could contribute to campus improvements. Indeed, most of the change strategies herein relied on partnerships among Program teams, their Scholars, and/or other stakeholders off campus. It typically takes time to engage these partners, as well as to establish stable Program activities, develop a track record, document stories and outcomes, and identify opportunity windows for influence. Success was often preceded by efforts to anticipate challenges and take steps to mitigate them in advance — perhaps best exemplified by the outreach to senior leaders on campus to engage them in active oversight and advisory roles. Whether partnering within or across institutions, these change efforts at their best represented transformative collaborations in which parties work to advance a greater vision for what the institution can provide.

Both the value of reflective practice and the challenges to tracking institutional change efforts appear consistently. The case stories from two early adopter partners who have gone after changes within their own institution reflect the early stages of a potentially rich conversation among peers across the Learning Partnership. What else are Scholars Programs trying to scale on campus? How are they seeking to promote those changes? What challenges did they encounter, and how did they address them?

As the initiative adds partners and expands into additional contexts, there will be even more diverse experience from which to learn. In fact, as the newer partners establish their Scholars Program, they will likely find their institutional change goals coming into focus. Perhaps this ongoing conversation can help inform and inspire efforts to institutionalize changes to most fully realize the potential of these institutions and the transformative leaders they nurture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Brief prepared by Leah Mwangi and Evelyn Gitau of the Africa Population Health Research Centre and Ben Kerman of the Social Science Research Council, in collaboration with Hélène Grégoire from the Mastercard Foundation. The authors are grateful for the inspiring examples and insight of the partners at the following institutions: Ashesi University, Carnegie Mellon University Africa, University of Edinburgh, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), University of Gondar, and Queen’s University.