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ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTED

An undergraduate researcher travels to Africa to find out what's driving female students to the top of their class—despite enormous obstacles—and what lessons there may be for U.S. schools.

BY CAITLIN CARROLL

Turning down a dirt road in Accra, Ghana, Sally Nuamah stopped at a house in one of the area's toughest neighborhoods and got a new view of her research topic.

Ms. Nuamah, BA '11, was dropping off a teenager named Charlotte after school. The teen was among a dozen or so Ms. Nuamah had been interviewing and observing in school for several weeks last winter as she researched disadvantaged female students in Ghana and the determinants of their academic success.

Charlotte, for instance, was the first female to be named class vice president in her school's more than 60-year history.

"I was driving her back home and she had this solemn, reflective face, and she talked about how she isn't scared of anything because she's seen so much. So when she gets out of the car, it hit me," Ms. Nuamah says. She was struck anew by the thought of "students who take two buses to school every day and come from such a difficult place, and are really academically successful."

Ms. Nuamah, who completed her project last spring—a paper titled "Educate a Woman, Educate a Nation: The Determinants of Academic Success for Young Female Students in Ghana" and a documentary film—became interested in the topic after

Ms. Nuamah administers a survey to a classroom of Ghanaian girls. "Research such as this—looking at why there are students who are succeeding in spite of the obstacles—can translate into positive policies," she says.

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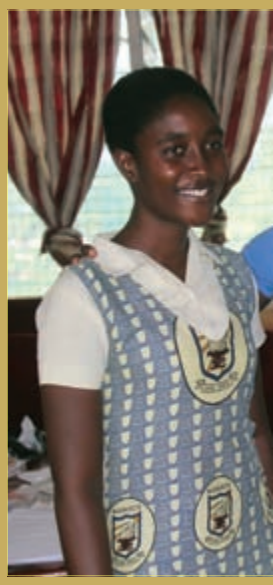

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she studied abroad in Ghana during her junior year with a Benjamin A. Gilman International Education Award from the U.S. State Department. The following year she returned to finish her work after winning one of GW's first $10,000 Undergraduate Research Fellowships.

During her junior year, she taped nearly 40 interviews with girls and women in the West African country, which was the first south of the Sahara to gain independence, has had a democratic government for the past 20 years, and has maintained relatively stable peace in a plagued region.

The country is also pushing for girls' education, a hot topic in global development policy, and is working to keep girls in school past puberty, when many stop attending; early marriages, pregnancy, access to water, and poverty can make it difficult for girls to travel to school or continue attending class rather than work.

During her interviews, she asked an array of questions about the students' academic experiences and perceptions of their abilities but kept asking herself the same one: Could these answers help the United States improve its troubled education system?

When Ms. Nuamah was a high school senior in Chicago, the school principal approached her one day in the hallway and enlisted her help.

The high school was made up of primarily non-white students from low-income, single-parent households, but the honors classes were filled with white faces. He asked Ms. Nuamah, who is African-American and from a low-income, single-parent home, how to get more students like her in the advanced classes.

"He posed the question to me: What would help push students to take more competitive courses than the regular courses they were already in?

"And I realized that my principal asking me made me feel a little better about myself. So much of it was positive reinforcement, expectations, labeling. And students from underprivileged communities need it so much more," Ms. Nuamah says. "Students need to be encouraged not just vocally but also through resources, and they need to be identified because a lot of times they're not going to speak out."

Despite standing out in high school, Ms. Nuamah wasn't always viewed as a student with potential. When she entered the Chicago public school system in second grade, she was placed in the English as a Second Language program—even though English is her native language. In third grade, she had to retake her standardized tests after failing them. The following year, Ms. Nuamah was in danger of failing the fourth grade. But she persisted and gained admission to a college preparatory high school in the district.

After her principal approached her that day during her senior year, Ms. Nuamah created an awards show at her school called the Other Grammys. Students from minority groups who were making good efforts in class—but who were not necessarily the top performers in school—were recognized for their work and encouraged to be even more competitive. The awards show has been running for seven years and is now held in a larger venue outside of her high school.

"One thing that I have learned in my own background, being from the inner city of Chicago and being considered disadvantaged in the U.S., is that education is really the only tool to get you into a different economic bracket or just life status than the one you were born into," says Ms. Nuamah, who attended GW at no cost through a mix of financial aid and scholarships, including a National Coca-Cola Scholarship and a Gates Millennium Scholarship.

"Students such as myself, just like those students in Ghana, end up looking at school as this kind of golden solution to changing what they've known."

But for far too many students the ideal of attending college, or even finishing high school, seems out of reach. "Because the situation is so grave in inner city schools

(Left) Two students from the West African Secondary School in Accra, Ghana, where Ms. Nuamah conducted research. (Below) Patricia Bedu (left) and Elizabeth Bonsu (right) were among the students Ms. Nuamah (center) spent time with in Ghana.

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around the U.S., where most African-American students aren't going to college or are dropping out of high school, it's truly an epidemic," Ms. Nuamah says.

"You have students who are the exception, but that's not enough," she says. "One thing that I love about the girls in Ghana is that [academic success] is not really the exception, it's the standard."

"Every single day, if they had something going on I was there," Ms. Nuamah says. Sporting events, Christmas celebrations, speeches, and any other school activity the Ghanaian students were involved in, she was their shadow. "I got to know these students very intimately."

She became familiar with their daily routines—typically long, nonstop schedules of chores, prayer, and school work, which started three or four hours before the school day.

One of the students Ms. Nuamah spent time with, Esther, spoke of waking up at four o'clock each morning to get ready, clean the compound, read for an hour, and pray before school. After school she would work at her aunt's store, read more, and then go to sleep around midnight before doing it all over again.

But that busy schedule, says Ms. Nuamah, is "very automatic and it demonstrates the importance of discipline and the acceptance of their way of life."

And that discipline, she found, was one of the key factors in the girls' success in school, when combined with their spirituality and determination.

"If I asked what the determinants of their success were, they would say: 'Definitely it's all because of God. I wouldn't be able to do it without God.' But at the same time there is this perception that it's not just God, you have to be able to work as well. So it's a necessary combination of your work with his grace that, as one student says, 'helps you to move mountains," says Ms. Nuamah.

The culture of spirituality there runs deep, and the people she spoke with believed "that they are being judged by their relationship with their creator and not with each other. And with this kind of perspective there was a view that they can't really complain or use their disadvantaged status as an excuse, because that demonstrates that they don't trust their creator and that they don't have faith," Ms. Nuamah says. "That was a huge, huge component that I didn't see coming."

But perhaps as important as their determination, spirituality, and discipline—qualities that aren't altogether unique—is the central place of these values in the girls' lives. "These characteristics have really been entrenched in their daily lives and ingrained in their habits," Ms. Nuamah says.

"I'm not saying we should all go back to the church, but it is an example of the central institution," she says. "And maybe it's as simple as the school taking on ... a proactive role in motivating students. Maybe it's as simple as schools being more disciplined in the ways they treat their children. And these are all non-financial solutions."

"Her Ghana project is something that a graduate student, or even a professor, would dream of doing," says Barbara Miller, a professor of anthropology and international affairs, and associate dean for faculty affairs at the Elliott School of International Affairs.

"When you think about it step by step—she had to make contact with the women, explain her project, gain their trust, and take their time to sit and talk with her—her success in gaining rapport is a testimony to Sally's amazing personality.

"She exudes empathy, compassion, and commitment," says Dr. Miller, who served with Ms. Nuamah on the university-wide global women's task force. "When Sally is in the room, you want to be there, too. She lights it up."

After Ms. Nuamah returned from Ghana, the task force (now the GW Global Women's Institute) connected her with a graduate student who worked with Ms. Nuamah on editing her footage into a documentary. She is now also further developing the film with the help of a producer at Kartemquin Films in Chicago and faculty members at Northwestern University, where she is pursuing a PhD in political science on a full-tuition scholarship.

Amidst all that, Ms. Nuamah is working to establish a scholarship fund for female students in Ghana, while hoping that her research in Africa will raise questions and spur ideas about education, including in the United States.

"Research such as this—looking at why there are students who are succeeding in spite of the obstacles—can translate into positive policies," she says. "...What are some things, that aren't financial, that can be structured or integrated into the curriculum or the policies or practices of societies?"

Steven Balla, a political science professor and Ms. Nuamah's faculty mentor for her project, says she is tackling an interesting puzzle.

"It was a good research question for her," Dr. Balla says. "It was really interesting to see her come back with findings that she might not have anticipated."

With the findings, Ms. Nuamah hopes to give people an opportunity to look at schools with fresh perspective. "Is our formula old? What should we be looking for in the future? What is happening now? Where are our values going?" she says. "Whatever it is, I think this can help to look at some of those problems."

To view a trailer for Ms. Nuamah's documentary, visit go.gwu.edu/in, or visit the film's Facebook page, HerStory: "Educate a Woman, Educate a Nation."