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Francisca Rivas / Daily
Sundial

Students from the Nigerian state of Ebonyi toured the CSUN campus on Oct. 20 to get a better understanding about the U.S. education system. Their 10-day trip encouraged the students to better understand democracy.

African students come to CSUN to learn about democracy, leadership

Samuel Richard

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On Oct. 17, Chukwudi Okorie walked into the Ronald Reagan Library and Museum in Simi Valley, fascinated with the information he learned about the former president's life and politics. He sat in the University Student Union Grand Salon, listening to African students discuss the importance of education on Oct. 20.

And today the 15-year-old student will begin his voyage back to Nigeria, with plans to make an impact in his country from the experiences he had and lessons he learned while in the United States.

"It was wonderful," Okorie said of his experience in this country.

He was not the only one who left today with new information and insight.

Okorie's trip was organized by the International Center for Educational and Youth Development, which recently brought 36 students from the Ebonyi state of Nigeria to Southern California to learn about the ideals of democracy, leadership and public service.

The center placed the students in its International Youth Leadership Academy and stayed in Northridge for 10 days with seven adults, taking classes at the nearby University Village

Apartments almost every day.

On Oct. 20 the curious kids, ages 12–15, lined the outside of the Grand Salon and later explored the campus, interacting with the community along the way.

“I want to empower them to know that they can make a difference,” said Agodi Alagbe, president and founder of the center. “They have a voice, and it is our responsibility — individually and collectively — to change our community.”

The empowerment seems to have worked on Okorie and the other students.

“I learned ... how to be a good leader and also how to be a good follower,” he said.

Okorie’s aspirations have been fueled by his experience at the academy.

“I want to be a doctor, and after that, I want to be a businessman,” he said. “I (would) love to stay in Nigeria. It’s my country. I want to improve it ... With all the things I learned, I will go to Nigeria and use it to influence the people.”

The students were the third group to come to the university since the program began two years ago. They were a selected group that took a written exam and were recommended based on what the center’s committee considered to be excellent results. Merit was also taken into consideration.

The center plans to bring another group from Africa to CSUN possibly this year or early next year, said Roseline Nwambe, one of the adults on the committee who accompanied the students on their trip.

“We want these students to see the other side of life,” said Nwambe, who is a lecturer at a college in the Ebonyi state in Nigeria.

The reading culture of several other children is “very poor,” she said, adding that she may make suggestions for the program to encourage students to develop a strong reading culture.

The students, who saw the Oviatt Library, the Pub Sports Bar and Grill and other locations, stayed on campus for about five hours and were hosted by the African Student Organization.

“They are the future of Africa,” said Marvin Boateng, vice president of ASO.

“It’s important that they see African students here on this campus studying, striving for excellence,” he said.

Francis Appiah, president of ASO, was one of the organization's members who spoke to the students about being in the United States.

CSUN students have asked him questions like, "Did you learn how to tie your shoes when you came to America?" and "Does Africa have a freeway system?", Appiah told the students, causing them to chuckle.

ASO members encouraged the students and answered their questions, which ranged from school tuition costs for international students to questions about the university life.

Members of ASO also exchanged e-mails with the students and plan to mentor and keep in touch with them.

"It's important that they make the connection with African students here, to see people like them (who) were at one point in time ... in the same position they were in: back home," Boateng said.

Tom Spencer-Walters, chair of the Pan-African Studies Department, came down to the Grand Salon Room to visit and support the group of students and adults.

In addition to seeing African students they can identify with, they also saw a "realistic picture" of the United States, Spencer-Walters said, adding that the country is sometimes associated with the mythical image of being an extremely rich society.

"It's very advantageous for them," he said of their exposure.

Their exposure to other Africans and the overall racial diversity at CSUN and Southern California gives them "a sense of placement for themselves," he also said.

The students, however, could have benefited more from their visit at CSUN if it was not brief and if they heard more about what it is like for a black American to be in the United States, Spencer-Walters said.

The students also had the opportunity to have fun when they went to Disneyland on Oct. 21, an experience Alagbe said would be beneficial because it exposes them to creativity and imagination.

In a world that has its negativity, Alagbe said the International Center for Educational and Youth Development, which is a nonprofit organization, intends to spread the program and its education to as many children as possible, with a need for more sponsorship.

The students participated in a graduation ceremony on Oct. 23 at CSUN.

Okorie was thankful for the program and for what he called “the warm hospitality” ASO gave them.

“I love the program,” he said. “It teaches you things you never experienced before.”

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