

Student Spotlight: Adebimpe Deji-Olatunde

Adebimpe uses the nickname Beam. She graduated with a Doctor of Education (EdD) from the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy on May 8, 2021. Following is an unedited interview with Beam and Tracy M. Rees, CoE Marketing and Communications.

Rees: Hi, Beam. Thanks for meeting with me today and sharing your thoughts and experiences. And congratulations on graduation! What's next for you? What are your long-term plans?

Beam: Thank you; thanks for taking time to interview me. I just graduated and am currently applying for jobs. I am trying to look for what I can do on a long-term basis and what I can do to impact life positively and be happy. I love diversity, I love inclusion, and I love action, but I haven't seen anything in that area. I was an administrator in high school in Nigeria. I have worked as an educator for 27 years. I have also been thinking about becoming an administrator here. I am working with the Utah State Board to get my license.

Rees: You came with a background from high school administration. What made you enroll in the College of Education's (CoE) Educational Leadership and Policy program?

Beam: I have always wanted my doctoral degree. I have always wanted to be at the top of my career in education. When I got here [Utah], I worked as a volunteer. In 2016, I was volunteering at University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), and the director, Sarah Muro, saw my skills and said, "Beam, why don't you go back to college?" and I said, "Why not!" Sarah took me on a ride to the college. I met with Dr. Larry Parker [CoE faculty], and he told me everything that I should do to apply to the program [Educational Leadership and Policy]. It was rough; the Admissions Office had lots of questions and requirements, and they kept interrogating my ability to be proficient in English. But English is the official language in Nigeria! There were over 250 languages spoken there, and we use three main languages as a common way to communicate: English, Yoruba, and Igbo. So, I have been speaking English since I was young!



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Rees: Wow! That's a lot of languages. What other languages besides English do you speak?

Beam: I speak Yoruba and Ijebu fluently, Egba and Ondo a little, but I understand everything that is said. I can say a few things like greetings in Igbo and Hausa but may not understand everything that is said. My next goal is to learn Spanish.

Rees: Do you get a chance to speak these other languages in Utah? Maybe as an interpreter?

Beam: Only when speaking with family. Nigerians love schooling. There is not a need for interpreters because they already speak English just fine. Someone in New York, a church member, called me to interpret, but just once.

Rees: What was your experience like at CoE?

Beam: The experience was from my heart. It was very motivational and encouraging, and supportive. I came here in 2018. One hard thing was that I even had to learn the technology. It was very tough for me. But because of my relentless efforts, I made it. My daughter is in college, and she and some of the people in the college helped me. I had tried to take some technology courses in Nigeria, but because of the electricity outages, I didn't get much out of it. I had taken some classes at Salt Lake Community College before becoming a student [at CoE], but the class was fast and not very one-on-one. Dr. Andrea Rorrer [Associate Dean at CoE] enrolled me in a Continuing Education class, which was helpful. My colleagues at UEPC [Utah Education Policy Center] were also ready to answer my questions, especially as regards technology.

I also want to quickly mention that the CoE professors that taught me—I want to thank them for their patience. My professors knew I would submit my assignments very early, like 2 weeks before the deadline, so if I needed to make changes, I could. I worked very, very hard to make sure I could get my papers and assignments in early. The in-person discussions were also very helpful. I did not have these same opportunities in Nigeria.

Rees: Why do you think the opportunities were different here [in Utah]? Is that because of the number of students, or was it more process-related?

Beam: I think it was the largeness of the classes. I asked the professor once for some computer help [in Nigeria] and could only ask one question because there were so many people waiting behind me. There were fewer resources. We only had 1 computer, so a lot of things ended up stick in theory and the abstract. Again, I graduated in 2006 in Nigeria with my M.ED. There were always university lecturer strikes because the government would promise things and not deliver, and people would protest. It delays everyone's education. Here, I knew I would graduate in 2021, and I did.

Rees: What do you see for the future of education here in the United States?

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Student Spotlight: Continued

Beam: I am very impressed with what is happening here, although it's not perfect. I worked with the bridgeworks team at UEPC. We worked to support school leadership and school improvement efforts. I can see that there are resources, yet I know we need more. Also, we need to put those resources in the right spaces, especially when we are looking at differentiated learning for all students. It is my desire to make a positive difference in Utah education and U.S. education. From my research findings on school-family engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, if educators can leave their biases behind and believe in all students and in themselves, it will make a difference to bridge the existing gap in education. Although my research had a small sample, it was clear that educators have good hearts; they just need the tools to be able to engage families who are racially and culturally different. For example, it helps when educators focus on who students can become instead of their shortcomings in the here and now. Teachers can set high expectations for students of color, hold them accountable, and still have compassion. As we invest tangible resources into education, the need for human support is vital to the success of our young ones. I recommended family engagement training be added to the CoE curriculum in my dissertation, especially as it relates to different cultures.

Rees: You mentioned your research was on school and family engagement. Can you talk a little bit more about your PhD research?

Beam: The title of my research was "Disrupted sense of place: School-Family Engagement during the Pandemic." My research identified barriers to family engagement; facilitators of family engagement; and school leadership support during the COVID-19 pandemic. I found that, yes, there is a digital divide, language barrier, family economic context etc., but I also found biases, especially unconscious biases. Some educators attested that they do not know how to help or include families who are marginalized, and many Utah public schools are diverse. So, there must be better family/student engagement to achieve our mission of "equity and excellence" in education. Training and education, and professional development on how to engage families should be part of teachers' curriculum. Genuineness and



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respect go a long way because they lead to relational trust. Think: if you invite me to your house for dinner, I am going to be looking at your countenance more than the food you serve. If I get the sense you do not really want me to come for dinner, then no matter how good the food looks, I would not want to eat because “your food should be as good as your countenance.” [Both laughing.] It is the same between educators and families, particularly families of color. If there is no respect, then there is no communication.

Rees: I can tell you're passionate about education. But what are some of the things you like to do outside of education?

Beam: I am a lover of people. Because of that, I do a lot of volunteer work. I am a Board member of the University Neighborhood Partners (UNP) and NeighborWorks Salt Lake. I am also chair of the Resident Committee of Hartland. I attend community council meetings to know what is going on in my community. Anywhere people are, especially supporting people to be great, to further their cause, to reach their goals, that is where I am. It is not enough to just be eating and enjoying life; I want to have an impact! My motto is, “Hard times never last, but hard people do.” I am putting my life history into a series and doing some life coaching. I will probably release the series on YouTube or Facebook. The goal I just achieved [graduating with a PhD in education] has been in me for 20 years. It took a long time for the opportunity to pursue that goal to arrive, but it came. People should never give up on their goals. We have no limit, but it requires hard work. I do all my work with humility, and I am not afraid to ask for help or support to excel.

Rees: Beam, this has been so great to talk to you today. Is there anything else you want to share?

Beam: People that are of low-socioeconomic status or that are English learners should not be seen as less or less intelligent. There is no menial work, and English is just one of the languages in the universe. We should value people. When I came here, I had to set my education experience aside to make ends meet. If someone saw me working in laundry when I first arrived, they might not know the level of my education. It is tough for people to integrate. People should never assume anything about someone because of their socioeconomic status. As educators, we should be ready to collaborate with all stakeholders. Then, our work will be easier than we thought. Families are our friends. We cannot educate children without collaborating with families. I feel it is our duty as educators to invite families to join us in making our noble work a reality. Educators are nation builders, and we should be ready to earn the respect of others. It may not come on a platter of gold anyway!



*From There to Here,
Always with a
Passion and
Commitment to
Education.
Congratulations and
Thank You, Beam*

