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Rich/Collins Community Leadership and Impact Fellowship Final Report 2023
Project: The Crown Initiative

(1) The implementation of the project, including timing, milestones, partners, and participants

As a Rich/Collins Fellow this year I created a logo on Canva and a title for the project called: The Crown Initiative. My project was inspired by the C.R.O.W.N Act which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair. When selecting a community partner I had the wonderful opportunity of attending Volunteer Fest this year as a Community Engagement Ambassador on campus and met Juliet and Ivy which are two heads of contact within Africano which is a nonprofit organization in the Waltham area dedicated towards empowering African youth and immigrants of the diaspora through numerous engaging cultural activities and conversations. The idea for my project was to host sessions that connected hair to a multitude of fields in order to host and allow Africano's members to engage with conversations and activities about Black hair and the multiple intersections it has. The sessions I planned on distributing to each of the participants was: the first episode screening of Ava Duvernay's *Colin in Black and White* which is a 4-part documentary series about Colin Kaepernick's life and experiences in athletics, Hair and Health, Cash Rules Everything Around the Finances of Hair, and the final Crown Collective Celebration.

(2) The Needs that the Project Addressed

The goal of my project was to emphasize and have cultural discussions with Black identifying students about the beauty of their hair and ways that we can practice taking care of, budgeting the finances around, and even building community pertaining to the importance of natural hair care and wearing it comfortably in everyday spaces without having it criminalized. I intended to bring attention to the way that certain hairstyles such as locs, braids, or afros are discriminated in

spaces such as schools and the workplace in order to also inform these students about the C.R.O.W.N Act and other mediums that are formulating and already in place to advocate against these forms of hair discrimination. Africano's goal is to enhance community and uplift African youth and immigrants by providing a safe space for mental and educational enrichment, visual and performing arts, and cultural connections. When entering my first day at Africano our first episode screening was very impactful since the part in which Colin Kaepernick was coerced into cutting off his hair in order to continue being a part of athletics was something that we deeply discussed. They mentioned how hairstyle choice can impact the ways in which they are treated when entering different spaces such as classrooms, workplaces, or even extracurricular activities. Hearing participants share their authentic experiences when navigating different hairstyles and spaces was very inspiring and enriching. Another vision of this project was to curate a collective canvas at Brandeis that honored the work and current legacy of the C.R.O.W.N Act to stand in solidarity with those completing this work as well as being able to have the wonderful opportunity to sign the canvas together with post-its as well as to have a speaker who was for this event Professor Wendy D. Greene let us know more information about how we could get more involved and provided us with an in-depth presentation on the history of race based hair discrimination.

(3) The process used to assess the impact of the project and the results of the evaluation

The process that I took in order to implement my project was hosting the Colin Kaepernick "Cornrows" episode screening at Brandeis with the Athletes of Color organization on campus and at Africano in February. After watching this episode with each of these groups I proposed discussion questions such as: Do you remember your first time getting your hair braided? Describe your experience and how you felt after?, Do you feel like you have adequate time to

dedicate to taking care of your hair and balance being an athlete? If not, if you did have more time how would you implement this in your schedule?, and if they ever experienced hair discrimination during their time as an athlete? In our group discussion, sharing each of our experiences allowed us to learn more about one another, and how we intend to make it better for those who may have similar experiences in the future. My next activity had to do with hair and health in which I focused on natural hair care products and specifically looked at the way coconut oil held to repair hair ends and length retention. After this, I hosted an event about the finances of hair and specifically hair products and we had a group discussion and piggy bank activity that allowed us to see what an average wash day through the products we use would cost. We then discussed the importance of natural hair products and had a deeper conversation about supporting hair businesses that cater to our hair but also how expensive these products can sometimes be as well. For my concluding event at Brandeis I created a collective canvas for participants who attended the event to sign with post-it notes a hair affirmation they would extend to someone who has experienced hair discrimination and also had a guest speaker and the legal architect of the C.R.O.W.N Act Professor Wendy D. Greene gave a profound presentation on hair, discrimination, and how it connects to today. Lastly, I concluded for my final session with Africano by completing small canvases that allowed each participant to draw what hair care looked like for them and their solidarity towards the C.R.O.W.N Act. In this last session I also created certificates for each participant with a Sankofa sign to honor their work, bright ideas, and commitment to this project.

(4)Unexpected Successes and Obstacles

Obstacles of the project were time management when it came to allocating different times in the semester to go to Africano as well as making sure they were available during these time

windows as well. Due to a lot of events happening with my community partner as well as other members on my campus also working with them it was important to vocalize dates in advance. Once again being that this is only a semester it's really good when faced with an obstacle like this to have an agenda of some sort that can change overtime but should for the most part be followed to communicate these dates upfront. Another obstacle that I faced during this year's project was getting items since I felt more rushed when last year I felt I had more adequate time to really plan out which items were needed for project events that I was interested in hosting. If I could provide advice from my experience with this project this year it would be to start everything as soon as possible.

(5) The Current status and Future Plans for the Program

The current status of the project is that the canvas is in the Intercultural Center at Brandeis and has a space for those who would like to stand in solidarity with the C.R.O.W.N Act to sign their names as well as the petition. Throughout this semester I have also developed a very strong community with Africano and I can't wait to visit next semester to attend even more events. My future plans for the project involve my Senior Thesis, and a Usdan Exhibit in February of 2024. I am looking forward to the creative and passionate project that blooms from this collaboration and the intersections of everything I have learned over my trajectory at Brandeis. Additionally, Professor Shostak in the Sociology Department at Brandeis will be doing a class session on hair and health and has asked me to come and present so I am really looking forward to this as well since Sociology is a great department at Brandeis.

(6) Personal Growth, Reflections, and Final Thoughts

Overall, The Crown Initiative has emphasized the importance of uplifting diverse hairstyles rather than subjecting them to punitive measures and practices by emphasizing the power that

comes with different hair textures and styles. Something that I loved about this project and experience was being able to engage with Africano's community members, traditions, and culture. This allowed me to explore more of the Waltham area and to know that there are communities that look like and cater to similar demands that I have as a young woman of color. Lastly, another takeaway that this project will forever highlight for me is the importance of being your true self, passionate, and spreading that love and good energy onto others. I didn't realize at the time but as I was doing each of these sessions and engaging with people they reciprocated the energy that I had because I was passionate about each of the activities I engaged with and topics encouraging others to tune in, help, and to learn something new by just being able to be my authentic self and to not shy away from that. Through trials and tribulations through multiple moments in the year continuing to be yourself and knowing you have value in each space that you enter is so important and something that this project magnified making it such an unforgettable experience in my Brandeis journey.

The Crown Initiative



