By **Kwabena Boahen Asare**

Finding my community

The lab doors swung open, and as I stepped inside my ambitions of becoming a Black scientist stood tall. Fueled by lifelong dreams of breaking barriers and shattering ceilings, I was set to embark on my first stint as an undergraduate researcher. But reality soon hit hard. The stark absence of Black scientists left me questioning my place in science. Would other researchers doubt my abilities? See me as an outsider? Or worse, feel hatred? For nearly a year, these fears brought me to tears and dimmed the flame of my aspirations. But when I joined an immersive program, living alongside aspiring scientists who looked like me, my trajectory took a much-needed turn.

Growing up, science shaped my world. I found solace peering through a magnifying glass at the intricate bodies of dead insects alongside my neighborhood friends, and I knew from that time that I wanted to spend my life unraveling the mysteries of science.

When I got to college, I decided to apply for research positions after learning about opportunities available to undergraduate students. Eventually, I joined a lab that studies skin cancers. There, I felt like a newly sprouted seed, surrounded by faculty and colleagues who nurtured my growth. My mentor believed in me, patiently explained concepts, and encouraged my initiative.

But within a month I was thinking about quitting. I battled imposter syndrome, feeling that my slow grasp of some lab concepts rendered me unfit for research. The absence of Black scientists in my lab and the wider community compounded my feelings of isolation and fueled my self-doubt. I began to wonder whether my ambitions were unconventional for a Black person and out of reach.

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I spoke with mentors at a center on campus that helps students from underrepresented groups. They reassured me that my feelings were common among students like me. However, they also encouraged me to continue to pursue research. To support my sense of belonging, they recommended a program on campus that was developed to create community and safe spaces for students from underrepresented groups who are interested in research. I submitted my application and was accepted to start the summer after my first year.

The program offered summer housing so we could all live together while doing research in various labs across campus. Early on, I spoke with a student who was studying artificial intelligence. As I listened to him talk with confidence about his work, I felt a rush of anxiety, knowing that I, too, would have to share the progress of my work. At the time, I was struggling to amplify DNA in the lab and my imposter syndrome was hitting the roof. But then he began to share how often his computer codes fail and how he sometimes feels like an imposter while working with experienced Ph.D. researchers and postdocs. I felt relieved that I could share my failures, too.

I continued to hear more stories like that at our programs weekly meetings and other social events, which strengthened my self-esteem and reinforced my belief that I, too, can become a successful scientist. I realized that the journey of science is similar for everyone there are always going to be ups and downs, and everyone encounters failure at one point or another. The mere fact that there were other students like me pursuing research also gave me a new sense of hope and enthusiasm.

As the summer unfolded, I became more confident in the lab. I could openly discuss failures with my colleagues without fear that they d judge me as being unfit for research. I succeeded in amplifying the DNA and carefully mapped out my next steps for the project. And when I hit roadblocks, I took a step back and troubleshooted the issues without internalizing them as personal shortcomings.

A year has now passed and I can say that the programs impact on me has been profound. Interacting with people who share both my skin color and my passion for science has reinvigorated my drive to be a scientist. Representation matters, and support from my own community was essential for creating a world where I can not only exist, but thrive. ■

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