Before Devin C. Hughes ’91 became a speaker, coach, author, and “Chief Inspiration Officer,” he was a Colgate Raider, an OUS scholar, and a recipient of a full athletic scholarship. Despite the determination he showed in getting to Colgate, Devin tells us that he “scraped through the next four years by doing the bare minimum.” Upon graduation, Devin had a mission to create change.

Although Devin thrived in the demanding environment of Corporate America, his true calling was to motivate people to reach their full potential. As described on his website, Devin is “an avid storyteller with a unique talent for connecting with audiences. Devin is at the forefront of leading culture change [...] After years of feeling isolated because of his mixed race and dyslexia, Devin now helps others thrive in a fragmented world.”

In addition to giving motivational talks, Devin is also an author and has published *Contrast: A Biracial Man’s Journey to Desegregate His Past* (2012) and *Self Talk* (2012), a comic for children who feel alienated or are experiencing bullying. Devin currently lives in San Diego, CA with his wife and four daughters.

1. What advice do you have for current students, in particular those who are from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds, to leverage their experience on campus?

I had no real context as to what college would be like as I was a first-generation college student. Hence, I was not well equipped to deal with some of the academic complexities and the rigor of being a college student/athlete. For example, I can recall many a time where I was in class and had no idea what the Professor was discussing, but I was reluctant to raise my hand and ask a question for fear of being judged as an not worthy, stupid, inadequate, etc... My advice would be for those who come from diverse/non-traditional backgrounds to break through the fear of not fitting in. Start a connection with all of your Professors to include asking questions, participating in class and be as focused on learning as one is on getting a good grade.
2. How do you define success professionally and personally?

Each day represents an opportunity to be successful both personally and professionally. If I am able to continue to do what I love and spend time with friends and family, then I need not much else. I am fortunate because I get to decide to what I will do and when I will do. There is power in that and a great deal of peace.

3. How would you advise students who are juggling with multiple identities, personal scripts, academics, work, co-curricular as well as extra-curricular activities to find a balance during their studies at Colgate?

It is certainly a balancing act to handle the academic rigor at Colgate, but it does not get any easier upon graduation. The world we live in is changing rapidly; so those who are able to learn, adapt and execute will have an advantage over those unwilling to take a risk.

4. How did Colgate’s liberal arts education prepare you for life after Colgate?

It taught me to how to think critically about the world. To push back and question “what’s vs. what’s perceived”. I did not realize it at the time, but the ability to digest information and get the heart of matter quickly has served me well.

5. How did you find your way to be doing what you are doing now professionally?

It was certainly not a well thought out plan. I like so many young people felt compelled to take the traditional route and get a 9-5 corporate job. I really had no choice since I was broke. I did that for 20+ years, and I came to the conclusion that my life and my legacy would not be just this. I wanted to leave something for the world well after I was gone, and so I began to write my memoir.

6. What do you like to do in your spare time?

I read a book a week and spend time with my family (wife and four daughters). I am also the Chief Inspiration Officer at “Reality Changers”, a non-profit organization (http://realitychangers.org/). Reality Changers transforms lives, schools, and communities by providing youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with the academic support, financial assistance and leadership training to become first generation college students.

7. What motivates or inspires you?
It changes. I’m motivated by outliers. Those people who live on the edge and are catalysts for social change.
As part of an immersive residential experience, nine OUS sophomores participated in the Sophomore Residential Seminars this past fall semester. The program received significant funding support from the Mellon Foundation. In this program, students lived and studied together in Drake Hall. After meetings with seminar professors and guest speakers, the program concluded with a travel experience related to each particular course. The OUS students who participated were:

(1) In Philosophy 216: Existentialism (Paris) with Professor David Dudrick; Jennifer Diaz ’16, Providence Ryan ’16, and Andrea Vega ’16;

(2) In Religion 228: Jerusalem: City of Gods (Jerusalem) with Professor Lesleigh Cushing: Dahiana Acosta ’16, Elsa Gomez Pena ’16, Nuofo Nabine ’16, and Melina Rosado ’16;

(3) And in History 254: Coffee and Cigarettes (Costa Rica) with Professor Robert Nemes: Ashley Brekke ’16 and Tram Nguyen ’16.

Students will also participate in a quarter credit course to reflect on their experiences and further their learning opportunities in the spring semester. We sat down with a few of our OUS scholars who participated in the program and asked them a few questions, and here are their comments.

1 What inspired you to apply to the Sophomore Residential Seminars?

Providence Ryan ’16: “I like the whole idea of living and learning in a community. You are given the opportunity to meet other people from campus that you normally might not meet. Getting out of my comfort zone and building on community through SRS is really cool.”

Andrea Vega ’16: “I like the class, Existentialism. As a biology major, I normally wouldn’t gravitate towards philosophy. I could see myself stretching and thereby trying something new.”

Nuofo Nabine ’16: “Through the Jerusalem class I am intrigued about learning and seeing the intersection of the three religions in the region: Muslim, Christianity, and Judaism. Growing up Muslim, it is a dream come true seeing the connection of the various beliefs.”

Ashley Brekke ’16: “I wanted to make the most of my time at Colgate, and I thought the SRS program was a great way to meet new people and have a unique experience.”

2 What about your course impresses you the most?

Providence: “Before SRS, I’ve never taken a philosophy course. Existentialism] asks us to put away preconceived notions, and build our knowledge based on our own experiences. This is something that I was never exposed to, and it helped me see philosophy in a whole new way. This really changes how I view the world.”

Andrea: “I found the course challenged me – challenged things that I believe in the most, whether it’s about race...or my views on religion and the meaning of life. The professor for the class was terrific – he guided the discussion without imposing his own views. We never knew about his religious beliefs or where he stood on issues until after the class. He asked all of us to put ourselves aside and look at the materials from a philosophical standpoint.”

Nuofo: “The class structure was really open-ended. For example, we were able to talk about women and religion in the context of the various beliefs as a spur-of-the-moment discussion. The professor never forced her views of religion in lecture or discussion. Another interesting aspect of the course was that we were able to cook, which allows for a different kind of interaction with classmates. Through it all, I learn more about my religion, my beliefs, and myself.”

Ashley: “I never knew goods, such as coffee and cigarettes, could have such complicated histories. We also tied in other modern topics to the course, such as globalization and interdependence of countries. The class was discussion-based, so it was interesting to hear what other people thought. We also looked at deeper issues surrounding coffee and cigarettes, such as societal and health issues. We delved into such detail about these items that we take for granted every day.”
A herbal medicine plantation owner helps Tram Nguyen ’16 cool down with a leaf after showing her how herbs can also be used as face paint.
What is it like living and learning in Drake Hall?

Andrea: “It is convenient, but it is also very intense. Walking down the hallway after class, we are still continuing the discussion from class. You can just knock on a classmate’s door and talk about the subject and get a different viewpoint or get clarification.”

Ashley: “It was difficult at first because all of my close friends lived somewhere else, but I got used to that. It was also weird because my roommate was a complete stranger. But we get along, and it’s not so bad to live with somebody who’s not your best friend.”

Nuofo: “You and your roommate may not agree on everything, but it’s good to be in a community where you learn and live together. Since we are together so much, we also found that we can talk more freely on whatever topic.”

What were some of the special memories from your trip to: Israel, Costa Rica and France?

Ashley: “I really got to know the kids in my group. We spent 24/7 with each other and became really close. Although there was a lot of traveling involved in my trip (we travelled all over the country), I enjoyed my time there. We visited several coffee plantations, a banana plantation, a pineapple plantation; we went zip-lining in the rain forest; saw a volcano; and took several nature walks through the rain forest. I love going river rafting. We also got to explore one of the towns we were staying nearby.”

Andrea: “How close the group [got during and after the trip]. We were at the Louvre and were surrounded by art and history. Before the trip, we might have superficial friendship, but after the trip, the group was really cohesive. We got to know everyone well.”

Providence: “I never dreamt that I would visit Paris. It was an amazing and incredible life-changing experience. I am grateful that Colgate afforded me this opportunify. From the existentialist standpoint, we were living our lives and adding to our experiences – we were in the same cafes as some of the philosophers that we studied – how cool and great is that?”

Nuofo: “We visited all of the important sites. But beyond the buildings, I was able to connect with the people. We were encouraged to do things on our own, to venture out as small groups. We were trusted to be able to find our own way back. For me, it was great that I have the opportunity (and ability) to lead. I was able to use my fluency in French – I spoke to a local nun in French – this really connected me with the locale and the people. Using another language other than English confirmed in me that I am in the right major – a sign from God that I am pursuing the right path.”

What recommendations do you have for students interested in this program in future semesters?

Andrea: “Take the class and not the trip. If you don’t like the class and its content, it is a long time to be in the classroom for the semester (and not to mention the quarter-credit the following term)... Work to be a part of the community. Do not isolate yourself – get to know everyone in the program.”

Providence: “When entering the program, you go in with a unique perspective. The class builds on what students shared and their various viewpoints. It’s ok to disagree. Take advantage of the discussion – you will find that the discussion to be more interesting and valuable. Put your own perspectives out there.”

Nuofo: “Try to be open-minded going into the program. You should challenge on what you are learning. The more conversations you have in the class will lead you to be more well-rounded and respectful.”

Andrea: “Be open to living with people who aren’t your friends. Be friendly and outgoing during the school year because you will be traveling with these people; traveling with new friends is more fun than with people you don’t really know. Enjoy your time abroad. Incorporate what you learn in the classroom to conversations outside of the class and during your trip.”

Throughout our conversations, it seemed clear that each of the seminars helped to create a strong community of scholars. The program fostered a safe space for students to connect – to dialogue and challenge each other intellectually. From the experience, new friendships were created as well. All in all, the Mellon Residential Seminar students fulfilled the mission of an immersive residential experience with a focus on in-depth conversations and learning with a global focus.
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Maya Atekulu ’15 and Tatiana Samahria ’15 enjoying the
Black Student Union’s Speakeasy event. Photo by the ALST Department.