

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

A Snapshot into the University Innovations Fellows Program: Experiences of Black Students

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INTRODUCTION

The University Innovation Fellows (UIF) program “empowers students and faculty to become leaders of change in higher education”. They do this through providing online training support, in-person meetups, mentorship support and resources for students and faculty.

As a qualitative researcher with the UIF for this quarter, I sought to explore questions such as: What were the experiences of black UIF fellows in predominantly white institutions? What opportunities did UIF present them? How were skills they learned from UIF transferred into their careers? What are some unique challenges they faced? How did they overcome these hurdles? What recommendations can we draw from these insights?

Ten qualitative interviews were conducted. Interview guides can be found [here](#). These were fellows represented across 8 different predominantly white institutions in the United States. Interviewees were selected from the years Fall 2014, Fall 2015, Fall 2017, Fall 2018, Spring 2015 and Spring 2017.

This report synthesizes the results of the qualitative research study I conducted over a 10-week quarter. It provides insights on how black students approached ideas of design thinking/entrepreneurship, team dynamics and negotiations with stakeholders. It also highlights both opportunities and obstacles that students encountered. It is important that we hear and reflect upon the voices from UIF fellows about their experiences and look at opportunities for the UIF program moving forward.

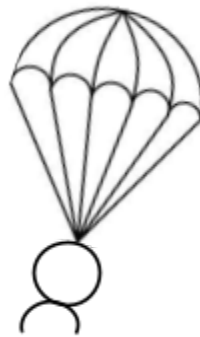
Learning from Extremes: Two Cases

I present these preliminary insights through the voices and the stories of two UIF fellows I interviewed. These fellows were selected because their stories were surprising to me, and although insights from them are also represented in the general findings section, I did not want their stories to be buried. The names “Kim” and “Kevin” are fictitious and selected for anonymity.

Parachuted - Kim

“We never got on the same page. And honestly, I have blocked every single one of them [on social media]. I’m sure that they can’t contact me. I don’t need that kind of energy.”

“Not even the adults got involved. So I really felt parachuted in.”



Kim used the term parachuted **6 times** in our hour long conversation. She was a black woman in a team with four white men in a predominantly white institution. She said, “that is pretty normal for student leadership on campus at [my school] specifically very limited access [for black students] and then there’s like the token, you know, just everywhere. It’s not just about being the token person in the classroom. You’re talking everywhere”.

She felt like the token black person in her team. For their UIF project, their team wanted to “continue looking at inclusion on campus” and “one of the ideas that they [other members of her team] came up with was a shadow program.”

They had several arguments and she didn’t agree with their ideas and approach for working with “vulnerable populations”.

Additional direct quotes that highlight her story can be found below:

“They wanted to have vulnerable populations, they identified vulnerable populations on campus like single parents, veterans, you know...”

The idea was ... “We should have someone from leadership on campus shadow these people back and forth from school to home. And so I just started asking questions like, okay, wait... why would a person of color or vulnerable person want someone like that in their homes. I don't get, I don't, I don't think that's a good idea. That was one idea we talked about for weeks and I was like, we shouldn't be wasting time on this.”

“It didn't turn out well for me personally, I remember it [disagreeing] drove one of my team members so crazy. They shouted at me in the middle of the meeting.”

“When your cohort was so fractured, and no one got on the same page. By the end of the semester, no one got on the same page so everybody had their different things that they wanted to work on.”

“I really felt like I was just parachuted into the program.”

*“They [referring to people on her campus who did recruitment] don't really take into account cultural differences. Um, so there was just a lack of cultural awareness from the people who brought us together.
And I can't stress that enough.”*

*I felt like I couldn't leave. That Stanford opportunity was so important to me. The design thing. It was so important to me that **I felt like I couldn't leave**. And so I chose to say. But I try never to operate with my teams [in management roles] in that way ever. I always try to leave the door wide open.*

*“Bridging cultures was expected to happen on your own, as you talk to people ...But there are **some of us who might fall through the cracks**. So it needs to be a little bit more intentional. That's what I would do, and then continue with everything else [in UIF programming]. **It's really great.**”*

[At the end of the call] “This was a little cathartic. I've never fully put into words [my experience] in front of someone so I'm thanking you for being a witness. I really appreciate it.”

A Transformed Perspective - Kevin

Kevin was a fellow who valued the benefits the UIF program provided. He valued the network and how he had grown through the relationships. Some of his current best friends and mentors were through the UIF. However, over time and with more involvement in programming, he grew more critical of the lack of structure for students of color within UIF.



[Image source](#)

“We see students of color, trying to make it for themselves. The black students would be like, ‘All the black UIF fellows, let's meet at the hotel lobby at this time,’ and they would organize their own stuff. And there's just not much recognition of the lack of diversity overtly”

“The program glorifies risk taking and you know chasing the entrepreneurial dream. But that in itself... we need to understand how privilege is involved in all of that and how, you know, a white kid from the Midwest from a middle class family can afford to take a risk and not work and pursue a startup, whereas a black student from [x campus]... wants to work three jobs to support the family and pursue their education. Like, what? Can they even take a risk?”

“I didn't necessarily see it [lack of diversity] as a drawback at the time. And that's partially because I was so focused on getting the most out of the program. That I was just running around and meeting this person and that person. And it was, you know, this is great. And also, I'd say my thinking has also evolved like over the past three years.”

“I've become a lot more critical and aware of these issues.”

*“For me personally, it **did not get in the way of my experience** at the meetup, or did not like detract from it. But yeah, things change...I think it's very, it's very telling that I wasn't necessarily focused on that and more focused on myself and my experience and what I could gain out of it.
Yeah.”*

Findings

Both those two stories highlighted above show individual cases. Across the ten interviews, I found common themes and these constituted the findings we see below. My five main findings were centered around the positive impact of the UIF network, the need for diverse perspectives in design thinking and entrepreneurship, influence of UIF on career outcomes, UIF recruitment needs and fellow team dynamics.

1. Invaluable relationships even beyond the UIF network

If I could summarise the most important benefit for the black students I interviewed from UIF in one word, it would be **relationships**. These relationships ranged from friendships with other fellows that they met at the meetup to connections/referrals made through UIF to opportunities that opened up that otherwise may not have existed. Additionally, in some cases, stakeholders on campus also became potential long term connections. Even in the rare case of Kim where internal team dynamics were awful, friendships were made at the meetup.

Consequently, the powerful impact and opportunity that UIF creates for students to build those key connections should never be undervalued. The connections present a unique impact that results in changing lives. How might UIF continue to create an environment and atmosphere for these relationships to be created and nurtured?

*It's been one of the **best decisions of my undergraduate experience to this date**. I still have people that I've met along the way, the mentors I've met along the way who I still keep in touch with. This previous weekend, I'm seeing another really good friend of mine I met there. In like a couple weeks I'll be in Austin, where I'm also catching up with a couple of my mentors there too. **To say that UIF kind of changed my life and I got a lot out of it would be an understatement.***

*Overall, I just had **a really positive experience**. And a lot of the people I would have connected with. For example, there was one local entrepreneur who religiously sponsored the hackathons that we had even after I left, he kept sponsoring those and then he would check periodically to say, okay, well, you go, you're still in grad school. Good, good. **So the connections that I had there even after I left from the program have been pretty good.***

*I would say, for me personally the program **has exceeded all of my expectations** ... The **opportunities that the network** has allowed me and that the knowledge that I learned in that first training and that first set of experiences and then sort of like continuous connection with the network has allowed me is just, I like can't put it into words.*

*I'm really **grateful for the Facebook page** that they have. So I could check on fellows and see the progress.*

*Certain people were huge...I became very close with Leticia and Humera and those are **relationships that are invaluable**. Those relationships have resulted in some pretty great opportunities for me personally.*

2. The need for multiple perspectives in design thinking and entrepreneurship

Five of the interviewees brought up a need for more holistic perspectives and “real” narratives when talking about design thinking and entrepreneurship. Ideas such as risk taking are glorified without recognizing the privilege that comes with it. Within the UIF curriculum, I identified a need to acknowledge and talk more about privilege and how (in the words of a fellow), *“the experience of change making as a person of color is actually going to be different than a white student.”*

Through these interviews, I was personally pushed to take a critical look at how both design thinking and entrepreneurship are presented. Which people are not included in how design thinking might be presented? What are some of the frameworks within design thinking that some black students are not connecting with? How can both design thinking and entrepreneurial skills be taught in a way that is more inclusive?

Like with everything, there is always a danger of a single story and from synthesizing the interviews, I believe that is the current flaw about how both design thinking and entrepreneurship are presented. More perspectives need to be included. How are black people applying design thinking in their lives? What parts are working for them and what parts are NOT working? Black fellows need to hear that. What do fellows need to consider before they try and start a business that their white peers do not?

Direct quotes below:

"We rarely discuss the hardships - because that would expose the deep gaps of privilege that exist within entrepreneurship."

"It is a very privileged take on entrepreneurship and social impact."

"I feel like design thinking has always been part of my people, my culture, my fabric and now I'm being taught it again. Those were the kind of conversations I needed to have."

"Let's be real. There are parts of design thinking that seem almost fake because our communities have been doing this without the title, without the structures and they haven't been seen as serious. Now that we're doing it as college educated intellectuals, it's like a new thing. It all just feels fake."

"I felt like some of the wordings, the topics, were geared towards a white audience."

"It's a very white lens."

"This [entrepreneurship] shit is hard. It's hard work and not just because it's like you need money or any resources or whatever it is. But that is like interpersonally draining and that we all come from communities where many of us are trying to save or dig people out."

"Trying to teach something that felt disconnected to me. Who doesn't buy it? I needed someone to be real with it"

"I felt like everyone bought into everything there where I felt at times...(pause) where I felt I didn't. I needed someone to be real with me and say I know some of this sounds like bullshit but this is how it works for me and as someone who is five years down the line than you are, this is how I've made it useful for me."

"There was a false sense of reality when it came to building of innovation"

"Be more realistic with all that stuff"

"Expose the privilege that this glorified image has been built on"

3. Career outcomes

UIF has a large influence in students' careers in terms of how they think about innovation, design thinking processes and how they interact with stakeholders. Design thinking processes permeated students' academic and career experiences whether it was present in a PhD program or when coaching students in public speaking.

"I actually do coaching for students now so students will come to me. I'll specifically help them go through the process of managing that [public speaking] at their next gig and I use design thinking the way I talk about prototyping discussions ."

"I'm getting into teaching and facilitation. Something I've become comfortable with because of the UIF."

"My program is called human centered computing. So it's like a nice mix of psychology and design and computer science. So, interestingly enough, it is obviously a lot of the stuff that we do in UIF. So like prototyping and designing with empathy."

"UIF opened my eyes to a lot of different ways of thinking about innovation as a whole."

"Introduced to new concepts that I wasn't getting in my grad work at that time."

"UIF allowed me to develop the skills to spot opportunities for positive change in an organization and empowered me to drive that impact. Building on these skills through side projects at Microsoft has enabled me to have impact while job crafting my career forward."

"UIF definitely inspired me to continue working in the field of innovation, especially once I graduated and worked for 2 years in my college's innovation department mentoring students to get excited about innovation and taking interest in working on real world businesses and creating their own projects. Afterwards, I would say that the mentality I developed while with UIF definitely strengthened my desire to work for myself and apply design thinking to my business ."

4. Recruitment

Recruitment was a conversation that came up especially with the interview question “Imagine you were a co-director of the UIF program, how would you support black students in your program?”

A perception that emerged was that the existing curriculum disconnects were because it was a reflection of the majority audience that was being catered for. In addition to partnering with HBCUs, what other models can UIF develop? What are the **actual** current recruitment percentages in terms of race? What are the **perceived** current percentages by fellows in terms of race? The direct quotes below begin tackling some of the questions poised above and I expand upon further ideas in the recommendation section.

“[Talking about recruitment] I want to be careful with it for a few reasons. Like, I don't want it to feel like, like other students to feel like okay like these people are getting preferential treatment or anything, because I feel like the program already at least say in my experience, like I felt like it was inclusive.”

“Currently, UIF is speaking at a majority white audience. Very different conversations if it wasn't those kids. You're getting like 80% white Midwestern kids. Because the schools are able to ... they're putting money behind the program.”

*“They need to have a much blacker speaker lineup and facilitator lineup. I think that the fabs need to be blacker. I think that the outreach in the like what's it called the photos and media that they put out like all has to be blacker because like a must. We need to be **explicitly called in.**”*

“It's not what you necessarily want in a program that's championing, like innovation and entrepreneurship. So that leads to several different dynamics within the actual meetup, of course, like there are very few students of color.”

“More recognition of diversity within the program.”

“Not as many African Americans as I would hope. Look to find ways to market UIF to African Americans. Go to places where you know there are more. Reach out to students - Letting them know that there are opportunities”

5. Team Dynamics

There are areas of improvement in how teams are recruited, how fellows are taught to interact with each other in teams and ideas of “cultural awareness”. **No one should feel parachuted into a program.** However, in scenarios like this whose role is it to step in? The program directors? Faculty champions? The team itself? What strategies can be used to further connect teams and facilitate cultural awareness within those teams? How can options be provided for students to opt out of what they feel like might be toxic teams or toxic situations?

When your cohort was so fractured, and no one got on the same. By the end of the semester. No one got on the same page. So everybody had their different things that they wanted to tack on

*Bridging cultures was expected to happen on your own, as you talk to people, which people will do, they'll benefit from it. Absolutely. But there are some of us who might **fall through the cracks.** So it needs to be a little bit more intentional. That's what I would do, and then continue with everything else. It's really great.*

*I felt like I couldn't leave. That Stanford opportunity was so important to me. The design thing. It was so important to me that **I felt like I couldn't leave.** And so I chose to say. But I try never to operate with my teams [in management roles] in that way ever. I always try to leave the door wide open.*

“I trusted her (faculty champion) she was a part of the program. I trusted her leadership, but then she took a step back, so she wasn't there. She was there, but she wasn't there as much.”

“And so what it turned into was the older cohort members were the leaders, kind of, they were the ones supposed to kind of help us navigate.”

Further Recommendations

These additional recommendations are based on insights highlighted above:

Strategic and authentic approach in building trust to aid recruitment

I believe an explicitly outlined outreach approach focused on including more students of color might be helpful in tackling the recruitment gap that past fellows identified. The plan should focus on building trust in communities of color, some of whom might need to be explicitly invited and called into unknown spaces in order to feel safe.

I think that its goals and misunderstanding on what is really necessary to get black and brown students into places like this and that it takes so much time and effort. And this is a team that is made up of, like, four people full time if that so I'm used to like in the mountain of other things that they have to do. They probably care very deeply about this, but like don't have the time.

*It starts with a lot of people who are ready and they're willing and they'll do all the things and we'll get it done. And we'll make it happen. And then I think that as we start to open our doors like it's we have to. Take into consideration that people are joining us from a whole litany of situations. And I think that's the thing that I've been the most vocal about as we've continued is **really making space for marginalized folks to join us.***

"I think the first and foremost, they would need to establish a code of conduct that like clearly delineates them as like an organization that cares about justice about equity"

Real Talk Sessions

Students identified a need for more realistic conversations that acknowledge privilege and hardships in entrepreneurship. Introducing more "real talk sessions" during the UIF meetup that bring in additional perspectives of these topics would be beneficial. Some of these sessions might benefit from being student only attendance (see quote below)

"I like that we were able to gather without the gaze of the program or the meet up and it was on our terms."

Black Leadership within Staff

I sought “black folks in leadership that I could pull aside and chat with”

“You know, diversity within the program, whether it's a dedicated team that's focusing on it, whether it's something specific in the actual meetup and then it's also just recruitment of students. I know they're trying to, they know it's an issue.”

Further recommendations that came up after discussing initial recommendations with UIF co-directors include:

Audit of language in UIF core materials

UIF can conduct a review of language used in the core materials for teaching and learning. Facilitators can invite students during the online program or meet up to share their own personal experiences about design thinking in their own communities. This might make it feel more real to some black students and help them to connect with the content more effectively.

“I felt like some of the wordings, the topics, were geared towards a white audience.”

“It's a very white lens.”

Transparency regarding UIF stance on diversity and inclusion

UIF may need to publicly state their stance on inclusion with a code of ethics or a statement on inclusion. The program should consider publishing their recruitment numbers and percentages in order to remain transparent and reduce any possible misconceptions of perceived numbers for race and gender.

Future Research Questions

Some initial research questions emerged from conversations with fellows and some of these questions have been highlighted below with a quote below to highlight the motivation of the question.

How might we teach students how to apply design thinking to communities that they feel might need solutions urgently?

“What community are you even doing the design thinking for? Can’t really wait to go through all those steps for people who need me now”

One idea that came up was that design thinking was too long of a “process” to apply to communities that are in crisis situations. In response to that, I think it may be helpful to explicitly clarify the misconception that design thinking is a single process rather than various processes. Design thinking needs to be reframed and clarified further to fellows as processes where the various steps become a part of the designer and can be implemented in certain capacities at varying levels to tackle problems.

What should the role of faculty champions be and how do we empower them to step in when a student feels “parachuted” ?

“Not even the adults got involved. So I really felt parachuted in”

Who needs to step in when teams are not working out? Whose role is it? How can the program further support various stakeholders?

To what extent does the current UIF model work for school settings with different “cultures”?

“School cultures might not be conducive to the current UIF model. There is a religion of self sufficiency in rural schools. A religion like you are here because you deserve it. And if you're not here. It's because you didn't deserve it and there's no sense of who did you start at the same place as everybody else, or did you start further back.”

”

How might we create a more equitable business model to bring in more diverse students from various backgrounds?

“Having a dedicated financial model that makes it easier for students coming from institutions serving marginalized populations to afford something like this is top of mind for me. I always say that if you see a group of students who are really excited to come, but they can't afford it. I'd love to talk about that.”

Conclusion

Overall, these past weeks have been insightful. For most of the students, they've recalled the positive life changing impact UIF builds regarding community and relationships. Their UIF relationships have become family.

There are opportunities for the program around the need for recruiting more diverse cohorts, the importance of acknowledging privilege in conversations that drive entrepreneurship/design thinking and the need for more representation when developing curriculum.

Further research should be conducted around how to teach design thinking in ways that connect more clearly with students from diverse backgrounds in a way that acknowledges power structures in play. Additional research needs to also be done around funding models and how to explicitly welcome and continue to support black students in the program.