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## OU students promote college readiness through national GEAR UP alumni program

Two Oakland University students recently went to Washington, D.C., where they spent eight days learning how to take leadership to a new level. From June 13-20, Daniel Lewis and La'Asia Johnson took part in a leadership training program, during which they met with elected officials and developed skills in peer outreach, social media activism, public speaking and issue advocacy.

The experience was part of the GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy (GUALA), a new initiative designed to train and engage alumni of the **national GEAR UP program**. GEAR UP, which stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, is a competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Education that prepares underrepresented students to succeed in postsecondary education. The program offers supportive resources to students – tutoring, mentoring, academic preparation and college scholarships – starting in middle and high school, up through their first year of college.



*OU students Daniel Lewis and La'Asia Johnson visited Washington, D.C. for eight days as part of the national GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy.*

### High school to college

Lewis and Johnson have been involved with the GEAR UP program since the seventh grade. Both graduated from Flint Northern High School in 2012 and received college scholarships from the GEAR UP program. They credit their GEAR UP experience with helping prepare them for success at Oakland University.

“In addition to the scholarship, the (GEAR UP) services in high school played a huge role, including college visits to give me exposure to the things I liked and disliked about certain colleges, time management workshops, ACT test-taking advice, and helping with filling out college applications,” Lewis said. “All of these things really contributed a lot towards my success as a student today at Oakland University mainly by giving me the knowledge necessary for me to recognize that OU was the right choice for me and tips on how to navigate through college once I got here.”

The GEAR UP program at OU has also made a positive impact, Johnson added.

“The GEAR UP staff here has done nothing but support and embrace us. They have encouraged us to grow and aspire to rise,” Johnson said. “They have also provided a platform for me to work with children and gain necessary experience for my career in Social Work.”

### Lessons in leadership

Lewis and Johnson are among only 30 students nationwide – and the only students from Michigan – to be accepted into this year’s GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy. Applicants were evaluated based on their academic record and involvement in the GEAR UP program. Both gleaned important lessons from their experience in Washington, D.C.

"I learned that leadership is something personally defined and tailored to your own experiences," Johnson said. "We all came together to advocate for GEAR UP and found that the GEAR UP experience looked different for everyone. We then took our personal stories and personalized our plans of action to mirror our own experiences."

"I was like a sponge all week," Lewis added. "We learned how to develop our story about GEAR UP and deliver it efficiently."

Along with networking with fellow GEAR UP alums, the pair met with Michigan Congressman Dan Kildee (whose district includes their hometown of Flint), as well as legislative aides to Michigan Senators Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters.

"It was my first time on Capitol Hill, and I feel like I got the opportunity to make a push for GEAR UP in our community, to continue to make a difference in the lives of underrepresented students," Lewis said.

### A promising future

Lewis said he plans to apply these lessons in his role as a GEAR UP mentor for **OU Pre-College Programs**. Both he and Johnson have been active in OU's GEAR UP program, which provides academic, social, career and cultural enrichment opportunities for the Oak Park and Pontiac school districts. They have also been recognized as exceptional student leaders and in 2014 received Oakland's Keeper of the Dream Award for helping eliminate racial and cultural stereotypes.

The GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy is a 12-month program consisting of 10 hours of volunteer activities per month. Lewis and Johnson will participate in ongoing webinar trainings, serve as motivational speakers, both in person and on social media, for OU's GEAR UP program, help develop a GEAR UP alumni network via social media and connect with members of Congress by participating in congressional district visits.

In addition, they will also receive mentoring throughout the 12-month program and participate in several events dedicated to raising awareness and garnering support for local and national GEAR UP efforts. Later this month, they will attend the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships/GEAR UP Annual Conference in San Francisco with OU's Pre-College Programs staff.

Lewis, a health sciences major, and Johnson, a social work major, will both enter their senior year at OU this fall and will continue working for OU Pre-College Programs and the **Center for Multicultural Initiatives**.

"With the support of both (CMI and Pre-College Programs), I feel confident in my ability to guide GEAR UP students down the paths to higher education," Johnson said. "I plan to use GUALA as a platform to connect GEAR UP students with one another and help build upon their support systems."



*Lewis and Johnson met with Michigan Congressman Dan Kildee, whose district includes their hometown of Flint.*