

## LEADOFF SPOT Internship program promotes entrepreneurial DE&I

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Naomi Winston was a student at Xavier University of Louisiana and an early-stage entrepreneur when she decided to apply for a new program that aims to increase economic equality in New Orleans' startup community.

In 2021, she was chosen as one of the first participants in GNO Inc.'s HBCU Startup Internship Program, an eight-week initiative that offers students at historically Black colleges and universities paid internships with local startups.

"They really established in me who I wanted to be as a small business owner, which was someone who genuinely cared not only about my customers, but also making the world more equitable and getting rid of racial and wealth divides between people," said Winston, who in 2019 founded Revolutionary Hearts Industries LLC, a clothing line and a publishing company for coloring books. "It also wholeheartedly made me realize how I wanted to behave as a boss and making sure I'm being fair to the people I work with."

GNO Inc. is entering its second year

of the program in partnership with The Idea Village and local HBCUs. Participating students are chosen from Xavier, Dillard University and Southern University at New Orleans.

This year's program launches June 6. Applications opened online in November and closed on Jan. 21.

"We truly, truly, truly deem this type of experience to be important not only to the students and the companies that are involved but overall just our region. We believe in diversity, equity and inclusion, especially in entrepreneurship," said GNO Inc.'s public policy manager Jasmine Brown.

Brown's team interviews applicants and selects 12 juniors and seniors that are hosted by 12 startups in the region. Students are expected to specify their academic achievements, entrepreneurial experiences and interest in the field.

Those that are chosen are then hosted by GNO Inc. and The Idea Village at an HBCU Startup Intensive where they learn what it takes to start a company.

"The main quality that we wanted to identify in students was that they had a desire to become founders, because again that is the whole goal: to train the next generation of successful founders

of color," said Brown. "So we wanted students who at least have an interest ... whether that interest is validated by having already started a company or other solid efforts toward entrepreneurship."

According to the New Orleans Data Center, in 2012 Black-owned businesses accounted for 24% of businesses in metro New Orleans, LatinX-owned businesses accounted for 7% and Asian-owned businesses accounted for 6%. The 2021 GNO Startup Report said these demographics closely reflected the 200 respondents for their most recent survey.

A meeting with the deans of the colleges of business at local HBCUs led to the internship's launch. The meeting was part of GNO Inc.'s Economic Mobility Action Plan, which focuses on initiatives that seek to generate wealth for the New Orleans' African American community.

It was expressed during that meeting that GNO Inc. could best support the institutions by providing their students with mentors, compensation and job opportunities.

"It was basically...because of the understanding of the needs of the universities coupled with our objective of increasing diversity pipelines among

startup founders that led to the development of the program," said Brown.

The first cohort of students was paired with startups including Catalyst: ED, Junum, Lucid, Broadmoor LLC, Obatala Sciences, Lookfar, rasa.io, Square Button Consulting, Torsh, Upriver Solutions and the New Orleans BioInnovation Center. Each committed to giving the interns meaningful work experiences.

Almost all the startups that participated last year have expressed wanting to join the program for its second year, with Obatala Sciences already confirming its involvement. The company previously worked with Winston, one of four students from Xavier in the first cohort.

"Working with Obatala, I always rave about how great of an experience it was overall, because working with small businesses...it's almost like an out-of-body experience to really understand that something can be both profitable and equitable," said Winston, who graduated in May 2021.

Most of the students from the first cohort expressed that they would recommend the program to their peers.

About a third of them were offered full-time positions with the startups they interned with.



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