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Masonya Bennett, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Black Studies



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Bennett Achieves Synergy Between Research, Teaching, and Service



Masonya Bennett, Ph.D., has achieved synergy between her research, her teaching, and the nonprofit organization she founded that broadens the minds of children in her rural hometown of Morven, NC.

Masonya Bennett, Ph.D., hails from Morven, North Carolina, a rural town established in 1883 with a population of 530 citizens who live within a square mile of one another according to the town's website. Her experience growing up in a rural community where everybody knows one another is summed up by the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." This manifested itself in her interactions with her community. Morven is where she formulated her early views about civic engagement, affordable healthcare, and the interdependent nature of communities.

Although her community was small, her exposure to the broader worldview that inspired her to learn more about the world's cultures and communities came from her parents. Her mother was a social worker who through her actions taught Bennett the importance of community support and her father, a retired USAF veteran, sparked her curiosity about the world beyond Morven. Through all of these influences her desire to learn and explore the world evolved.

Today, as an assistant professor of Black Studies in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at Radow College, she brings an appreciation for interconnectedness of our global communities' cultures and economies to her classroom, her research, and the 501C3 nonprofit organization, Parallel Cultures, Inc. that she founded in 2019. Bennett, a faculty member for the past two years, says "Right now I am teaching Black Studies 1102: Issues in Black Studies, and Black Studies 2200: Black Thought Matters. Last year I taught 1102, but I also taught Black and Minority Entrepreneurship, and that course coincides with both my research and my service work."

Bennett's past research examined Black, African, Caribbean, and Afro/Latinx immigrants in the United States' southern region with a particular focus on "the role of material culture, space, and place in shaping Black identities and an individual's personal perspectives. Her current research investigates the "informal economic exchanges" between Black American tourists and Black expatriates in Columbia, and Afro Columbians. It is this research that she has merged with her service work.

As the founder and director of Parallel Cultures Bennett says, “we do youth-based cultural workshops, we do a summer camp featuring culture, leadership, and knowledge with K-6 youth and we do it starting in my rural hometown.” She went on to say that her work is “bridging the gap between academia and secondary education, making that the focus of my research, as a sort of social, entrepreneurial in-depth study.”



Children attending the Parallel Cultures summer camp enjoy myriad cultural and educational experiences.

As part of the programming designed for Parallel Cultures' summer camp, Bennett combines cultural exploration with learning about business and entrepreneurship by inviting a professionals from a wide range of career paths including a primatologist and a vegan chef, to conduct workshops with her K-6 campers. For example, she had an anthropologist from the University of Houston teach the children about hieroglyphics and how to make papyrus, while at the other end of the spectrum experts in app development from Google and Apple give the campers an inside look at how software development goes from an idea, to a functioning app, to a marketable product. All the workshops the campers take part in are delivered by Black professionals who seamlessly convey the integration of cultural awareness and sensitivity with their areas of expertise. What they learn during the summer camp stays with them, she says, and “continues throughout the year. We talk to the teachers. You know, they remember certain things [from camp], a lot of times they're telling the teachers things that they learned.”

Blending the worlds of research, teaching, and service wasn't Bennett's first strategy. It was only after a conversation with her mother that the idea came together. Says Bennett, "I like teaching what I teach. I like Black Studies, and I like cultures. I feel they are important to discuss across ages." It was during a conversation with her mother who, referring to the non-profit work said she had created another whole job for herself, when it clicked. It was at that moment she decided to find synergies. "So that's why I really started to think about how I can merge the two. Looking at curriculum development. Working with other educators in K-6 and showing how you can use academia and academic tools and methods and bridge the gap between secondary education. I am bridging the gap between academia and secondary education and making that the focus of my research, looking at the social, entrepreneurial aspect in depth. It coincides with my classes and what I teach, showing how you can apply Black Studies to the things we that we learn about Black entrepreneurs and Black history and culture into tangible outcomes in multiple fields."



Bennett's nonprofit organization Parallel Cultures, founded 2019, host a summer camp attended by children from her own rural hometown, Morven, NC.

The confluence of Dr. Bennett's love for teaching, global curiosity and thirst for travel, dedication to research, and her drive to give back is summarized in what she says about Parallel Cultures, Inc. "Our mission aspires to illuminate new possibilities, enrich and broaden cultural awareness and global perspectives, and inspire a generation of successful global citizens – starting with K-12 student populations in underserved rural communities." That perspective could also describe her research and her approach to undergraduate education.

