

Student Programme for Innovation in Science and Engineering (SPISE)

July 27, 2016

Around this time last year, a friend, Kadesh Daniels, and myself had for some reason gotten ourselves into SPISE. We had forsaken the laid-back vacation lifestyle, for instead an intensive science centred programme on the Barbados campus of the University of the West Indies.

For some, it would seem ridiculous to 'waste' one's summer away like this, I mean who would want to do work during the days of the year we're specifically assigned to not do work? Truthfully, I needed some convincing myself. And having been convinced I'm going to try to spread the word myself. Currently, SPISE 2016 is in the midst of its second week, with one lone Guyanese student, another dear friend of mine, Shannon Woodroffe, enjoying the struggle of assignments.

It occurred to me that perhaps the small number of Guyanese students who attend the programme may be due to the lack of knowledge of it, and perhaps maybe a little disinterest. So allow me to attempt to rectify both of those problems. SPISE is a four-week annual programme which students from all over the Caribbean apply to attend. It is hosted at the scenic Cave Hill Campus of the University of the West Indies, organised by the Caribbean Science Foundation. During the four weeks, students have a university like experience living in dorms, and taking a variety of courses with a strong science core. Some of these include: Calculus, Physics, Biochemistry, Robotics, Electronics, Entrepreneurship, Caribbean Unity – and even Mandarin!

Before we get ahead of ourselves, let's make sure we understand each other; SPISE is not a summer camp. To get in, one must write a number of essays, provide transcripts and letters of recommendation. It is not relaxing and it requires a lot of sacrifice and dedication. While you can get the details of the programme online with a quick Google search, I want to do my best to explain how the SPISE experience can benefit one as an individual.

At SPISE, the first obvious benefit is learning. The whole programme is about self-improvement. It's not how well you do, but how better you can get. The way in which teaching is done is completely different from classes in regular high schools, and you're exposed to a peak sneak of university life – the dorm life, the long lectures, and the eager teaching assistants. SPISE puts you under the pressure of late nights, harsh deadlines, and strange new materials. All of these things help you to become a more mature student. In addition to the actual book knowledge that you learn, each week

there are career talks by different professionals in science and technology fields. Last year, we were introduced to someone who works as a biomedical engineer, a previous NASA employee, and even an entrepreneur from Silicon Valley who had spearheaded a campaign for extremely technologically advanced motorcycle helmets. And if this wasn't enough, you are given seminars about how to write CVs, apply to university, and to write compelling essays.

While knowledge is one thing, human connection and networking is another. By attending SPISE you are exposed to successful Caribbean scientists, and you form relationships with MIT Professor Cardinal Warde, and Dr Dinah Sah, who more than willingly offer their guidance and support during the university application process. Even after you leave SPISE, you don't fall out of the loop. You are kept updated about possible internships and learning opportunities that may arise. But that isn't all. By going to SPISE, I was able to meet sixteen new students, from countries all over the Caribbean who shared my interests, and quickly became my friends. Culturally, it's a unique adventure, to say the least.

As Caribbean students, opportunities like this aren't the easiest to come by. SPISE opens up your eyes to your own true potential, it helps you develop confidence and faith in yourself, and enables you to begin getting the career you want to. I don't regret attending it in the slightest. Students are often sponsored, and low-income students are encouraged to apply. So, if you're up to the challenge, one month of summer won't kill you – go forth and be productive!

You can access further information at caribbeanscience.org, under the CSF projects tab.