Each year, the Luard Scholarship sends HBCU juniors to Britain institutions of higher learning. To date, 10 Morehouse students have won the honor. Alvin James Schexnider ’05, who graduated last May with a degree in political science, spent his junior year in London, and now James Dessin ’07, a history and French major from Boston, will spend this school term at Cambridge University. The two men sat down and talked with each other — one reflecting on his life a year ago; the other looking ahead to things to come in a country across the pond.
Schexnider: Why did you pick Cambridge?

James Dessin ’07: Well, Cambridge has an interesting history. It’s been around for a while. Cambridge is one of the oldest English-speaking universities in the world and so naturally I was attracted to it. And some of the scholars that I respect—Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Appiah—they had gone to Cambridge as well. Because of that, I knew Cambridge can produce great, black intellectuals.

Schexnider: What are you going to be studying there?

Dessin: I’ll be studying African history in the Modern History department and having a slant on colonial history and Haitian history so that would be African, European and Caribbean interaction.

Schexnider: I’ve been abroad. I’ve been to Scotland, I’ve been to South Africa, but I’ve never been to England. England has such an interesting history. So much of world history has been impacted by English history and British history. I would love to learn more about the Britons and the culture—what it’s like to actually live there and work there. It’ll be interesting to see what their take on American and global politics will be like. Just learning more about what they do on a day-to-day basis and just how they see the world is something I’m very interested in.

You went to LSE, the London School of Economics, last year. How did you choose the school and what did you study?

Schexnider: Prior to going to LSE, I always thought I would be directly involved in public policy. I didn’t really know the strengths of the private sector; I didn’t really understand the relevance of money or the importance of markets in our world. But like it or not, these things really do affect our day-to-day lives and so to have an understanding of it is something that I learned was very important by being at LSE. A lot of my friends were statistics, economics and finance majors. There’s a really strong relationship between business and government.

Dessin: What did your year abroad teach you about yourself?

Schexnider: When you go to an area or a place that is foreign to you, there’s a different culture, there are different experiences. It enhances your situation, it enhances your strengths and your weaknesses and that’s the thing that you learn most about yourself.

With me, I have a propensity for wanting to take on new experiences, so that was a strength that was enhanced. But, at the same time, one of the things I had to work on when I first got there was my shyness. Now, my being shy, going to another country, to be honest, once I got there, it had to go. I worked on my ability to relate to others because there were several individuals there who weren’t like me. So, being there affected me in that way.

Tell me about some of your off-campus extracurricular activities? What’re you involved in?

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EXCHANGE
**Dessin:** One organization that really got me to focus on development and international migration trends is the Harvard Migration & Immigrant Incorporation Workshop. It’s a grad school organization and I’m the sole undergrad in the group. I had an opportunity to meet a number of visiting scholars like Jean-Philippe Dedieu, Fulbright Scholar from France. He shared a paper about African immigration to France.

This group really made me think about development and how expatriates can contribute to their mother country. I realized that as a Haitian-American, I can do a lot to contribute to development in Haiti. And so through that I got involved with other groups and other projects including the Nigeria Project, a project where Rotarac students are working towards building a well water facility in the Okwele Orphanage in Nigeria.

I have a question for you. While in Britain, did you feel like you were a black man or an American or both? What did you really identify with?

**Schexnider:** I felt like I was American first (that was my perception and others’ perceptions of me) and black second. [In America], I think a lot of us [blacks] generally tend to say that we feel that we’re black first and American second.

**Dessin:** What advice would you give me going in? What general advice in regards to identity or relating to the British culture, in general?

**Schexnider:** Quite simply, the best advice I would give you is to meet as many people as you can. The greatest education you’re going to get isn’t going to be from the classroom in Cambridge. In my opinion, the greatest education you’re going to get is your interaction with other people. Just the [number] of students you’re going to interact with is mind-boggling to me. Just take advantage of that, it’ll make you a better person. You’ll also be able to appreciate your experiences at Morehouse as a result because the students here are just as incredible.

Alvin, I was wondering, what was it like being in Europe during the war in Iraq, especially since it was during the height of the U.S. interactions with Iraq?

**Schexnider:** It was an incredible experience. I got there in October, so between October and November, the media was in a frenzy. I remember one day there was a huge British protest against the war and everyone congregated in London and they marched toward the BBC [British Broadcasting Company] headquarters. The BBC headquarters, or one of their main buildings, is across the street from LSE.

I’ve never seen such a massive mobilization of people fight for one cause. Whether you are for or against the war, it was just an incredible experience and it was quite a hassle getting home. I also saw myself defending America at points because some people have misconceptions of what the American public actually is. We don’t all believe in the same ideals. I don’t believe in the war, but found that sometimes I would have to defend the country and what people believed about it.

When you go to Cambridge, what do you plan on doing there?

**Dessin:** When I get there, I don’t plan to get involved in too much. I really want to focus on my studies. But, of course, I do plan on being involved on campus... I definitely want to get involved in Model United Nations. Cambridge has a very strong team and a very strong delegation and I want to be a part of their delegation next year. I plan to debate for Cambridge. It has a very vibrant and very competitive debate society, and so I definitely want to infiltrate and be a part of the debate team there.

Why don’t you tell me what you plan on doing once you finish Morehouse?

**Dessin:** I would love to return to the UK to do some graduate studies, but if not, I would love to do a dual graduate-professional degree. I’m looking at some programs now and there’s a program in public administration and international development. I’d love to do that program in conjunction with a J.D. Hopefully, once I complete my studies, too, I want to jump into development firsthand.

I’ve learned so much about you this year and during this discussion. You’ve done well here at Morehouse. You made Phi Beta Kappa. You studied at LSE for a year. You’re going to Dartmouth for the summer; you’ll be at Cornell next year. What motivates you to succeed?

**Schexnider:** Faith in God. The support of my friends, family, faculty, administration here and role models that I’ve come across at Morehouse like Topé Folarin ’04 [Morehouse’s third Rhodes Scholar] and Voltaire Sterling ’02 [just graduated from Harvard University’s Law School]. These guys have gone through Morehouse and have gone on to do wonderful things. But I think the strongest motivation that I have comes from myself. I really believe in self-determination, simply for the fact that I can’t wait for others to validate my aspirations, I’m too impatient for that. If I see something, I want to go for it. And I also have a fear that I’ll become so proud and so comfortable with my past accomplishments that I won’t work as hard to produce new accomplishments. So, one of the things that I plan to do once I leave Morehouse is press the reset button. I start with a clean slate. I have to prove myself again once I leave here.

That’s how I live my life and hopefully it’ll work out.