

# THE NAFSA AFRICA FORUM: **BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS**



*by* Charlotte West

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte West, a former Fulbright fellow, is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to NAFSA's award-winning *International Educator* magazine.

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At its 2017 Annual Conference & Expo in Los Angeles, California, NAFSA: Association of International Educators hosted the first annual Africa Forum, which brought together African higher education leaders and their partners from around the world. The goal of the event was to build partnerships, create new networks, and boost academic collaboration with African institutions. More than 100 participants attended the forum.

In the last few years, NAFSA has provided increased support for partnerships and capacity-building in Africa, as well as created opportunities for dialogue between representatives of African higher education institutions and their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere. Africa had increased visibility in several of the sessions at the 2017 conference, and the forum provided an additional opportunity to explore the many different perspectives on internationalization in African higher education.

Representatives of NAFSA's Global Dialogue Fellowship Program, which seeks to assist university leaders in sub-Saharan African countries in increasing their institutions' international education capacity, helped lead the conversation at the forum. The fellows led breakout sessions specifically focused on the various regions of Africa during the second half of the event.

## **IDENTIFY CHALLENGES AND TAKE STOCK OF INTERNAL RESOURCES**

Kelechi Kalu, vice provost for international affairs at the University of California-Riverside, chaired the event. He challenged African institutions to create a unique vision for internationalization on their campuses. They should be very clear about what they want when they approach international partners, he said.

“Understanding precedes transformative action. Many African higher education institutions are still trapped in their colonial structures so the question is, what are the challenges? If we know what the challenges are, we can think about what resources we have institutionally and regionally for meeting those challenges and come to understand what we need and who we need it from. When we know what we need, we’ll have a clearer idea about strategic international partnerships,” Kalu said.

One of the challenges is the economic context in which many African higher education institutions are operating. Gladys Attah-Gyamfi, a Global Dialogue fellow from the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, says that unemployment in Africa sometimes makes it difficult for institutions to employ faculty or staff from partner institutions. “In most cases it is difficult for these institutions to justify to the government why they need to employ these



Moderator Kelechi Kalu

foreign faculty while there are qualified nationals who cannot find work. For instance, there has been a ban on recruitment in public organizations and for that matter, public universities, for over three years in Ghana and this makes receiving foreign faculty or staff who will have to be housed and paid by the university difficult.”

Peyi Soyinka-Airewele, professor of African and comparative international politics at Ithaca College and a featured speaker at the event, said that African institutions also need to be very transparent about their limitations when dealing with international partners: “We sign the memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and very often the partners in the Global North are unaware or do not fully understand the constraints under which those things take place.”

As an example, she described a collaborative classroom project she worked on with an African institution. Her institution uploaded all of the textbooks, videos and other materials for co-teaching to a website. The other professor suddenly stopped communicating, and it took a while for Soyinka-Airewele to realize the other institution was dealing with power outages. Eventually they were able to find funding to allow students to go to a cyber cafe outside of the university.

“Very often people let the programs collapse because they’re not candid about what it is that they’re looking for and the limitations with which they’re dealing. Intentionality and being conscious of what you’re bringing to the fore can help make a program successful,” she said.

Others concur it’s equally important to share successes as it is to be upfront about challenges. Khadidiatou Diallo, a Global Dialogue fellow from Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis in Senegal, said that transparency should be at the heart of any negotiation with potential partners. “Promoting transparency with potential partners means talking about the assets and positive actions...[but also] sharing with potential partners the difficulties and challenges that [we are] facing to enhance lasting and fruitful partnerships with academic



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institutions. These difficulties turn essentially around budget constraints, instability of the academic year, due mostly to strikes, and absence of official figures about cooperation agreements, which, most of the time, lack a terminal clause.”

Kalu also argued that it’s necessary for African institutions to take stock of internal resources before signing international partnerships. “First, we need to know what we have, what we want, and why we want it before we can ask outsiders to help us. Come to the table with an agenda driven by your own mission, driven by your own desire and knowledge of what is possible and probable,” Kalu suggested.

At the University of Education in Ghana, MOUs must be signed with specific activities and objectives in mind. “We identify specific areas of cooperation with subsidiary programs and agreements. To these, we also identify project persons and resources so that at least, each MOU would be linked to one activity with an identified aspect of our university and with an internationalization goal. Without that, the MOU becomes... just a statement of intent, which... often dies,” said Global Dialogue fellow Johann Yaw Sekyi-Baidoo.

Another aspect of effective partnerships is clearly spelling out who is responsible for what. “Transparency can best be promoted by putting in place well thought out rules of engagement with clear checks and balances. Where funds and resources are involved, there should be provision for periodic audits by the two collaborating institutions at any stage during the relationship,” said Thomas Brighton Bhebhe, a Global Dialogue fellow from Chinhoyi University of Technology in Zimbabwe.

Johann Yaw Sekyi-Baidoo said that senior leadership at many African higher education institutions seems to be focused on gaining financial support from abroad or enrolling foreign students “rather than enhancing what we really can offer the world.”

He advised those working with international programs to link their requests for funding with some immediate benefits for the university.

Other fellows pointed out that mutually beneficial partnerships do not necessarily have to involve funding. Carla Marilia Teofilo Braga, a Global Dialogue fellow from Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, said that her institution has formed a partnership with a Latin American research network affiliated with an international conference. “From our side we can say the conference has an international scientific committee, and from their side, it shows their internationalization and relationships with an higher education institution in Africa,” she said.

## AFRICA SUFFERS FROM TOO MUCH AND TOO LITTLE INTERNATIONALIZATION

Soyinka-Airewele also presented a paper on behalf of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, vice chancellor at the United States International University-Africa in Kenya and author of the 2016 book, *The Transformation of Global Higher Education, 1945–2015*. Originally scheduled to be the keynote speaker for the forum, Zeleza was unable to attend at the last minute.

Zeleza’s paper outlined several of the challenges currently facing African higher education institutions. He argued that one of the main elements of recent internationalization has been the growth of international collaboration in research and publications. He cautioned that while on one hand there has been a boom in global research collaboration, on the other hand internationalization has “reproduced the uneven patterns of access to education and knowledge production evident in domestic settings.”

Different regions have furthermore benefitted unevenly from the growth of the global knowledge economy. “By the mid-2010s, the position of many regions, subregions, and countries in the Global South as centers of knowledge production remained precarious,” he wrote.

According to Zeleza, Africa has been left behind in terms of global research and development (R&D) and its distribution of researchers and scholarly publications. He noted that the majority of publications by African researchers were written in collaboration with international authors. “In nearly 30 African countries authors published more than 90 percent of their articles in collaboration with other countries, especially the USA, France and the United Kingdom. Clearly, African academic knowledge systems, like its economies, suffer from limited regional integration and high levels of external dependency,” he wrote.

Zeleza argued that African universities are too dependent on other countries in terms of research



and knowledge production, but they have not benefitted enough from the presence of international perspectives on their own campuses:

African universities suffer from both too much and too little internationalization. Too much because they are modeled on the higher education systems of the Global North and many have yet to fully decolonize themselves in their structures, processes, governance, and curricula... African academics remain excessively extraverted as they borrow methodological and theoretical perspectives, paradigms, and problems and seek intellectual legitimation from the Global

North. But African universities exhibit too little internationalization in the composition of their faculty, students, and administrators... Also, African universities are largely not globally competitive as evident in international rankings, whatever one may think of the validity of such rankings.

Zeleza also pointed to the rise of “xenophobic nationalisms” in major destination countries, illustrated by developments such as the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. This has created opportunities for African institutions to reposition themselves in the global education landscape. He encouraged African universities to explore possibilities for South-South collaboration, interregional partnerships, and diasporic knowledge networks.

“As key countries in the Global North become increasingly inhospitable to international academic flows and engagements, African universities should seek to attract some of the best or wealthy African students that flock to these countries. Also, they should strive to appeal to students from other regions of the Global South unable or unwilling to go to the Global North,” he wrote.

NAFSA looks forward to continuing the conversation started at the Africa Forum and welcoming the 2018 cohort of the Global Dialogue Fellowship Program in Philadelphia at NAFSA’s 2018 Annual Conference & Expo.



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