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Building Partnerships: The Global Health Initiative and Njala University

Gregory L Damhorst, Elise Duwe, Kenneth Long
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The Global Health Initiative (GHI) is a campus-wide effort largely driven by students of the Medical Scholars Program (MSP) at Illinois. Since 2011, the GHI has organized and co-sponsored seminars, guest lectures, multidisciplinary dialogues, and an international experience in Cape Coast, Ghana. In 2013, GHI launched a program to develop an international partnership around global health themes with the goal of fostering a long-term relationship with an overseas institution that would create space for new interdisciplinary, inter-institutional research and teaching initiatives.

A call for nominations and campus-wide search revealed an existing partnership between Illinois and Njala University in Sierra Leone. Njala was established in 1964 by faculty from the University of Illinois with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Since that time, a civil war lasting from roughly 1991 through 2002 devastated Sierra Leone. In particular the war took a tremendous toll on the Njala University system, including loss of facilities, staff, and students. As Sierra Leone emerges from a phase of post-war rebuilding and embarks on a phase of growth in the international scene, the relationship between Njala University and the University of Illinois has been strengthened through extensive engagement with a number of faculty and students facilitated by the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) with leadership from key faculty including Profs. Paul McNamara (ACES), Richard Cooke (ABE), Gay Miller (Vet Med), and others.

The Illinois-Njala partnership, which was previously focused on agri-business but recently expanded its scope to emphasize global health themes, showed the potential for a successful partnership in global health. For Illinois, the goals of the envisioned program were to demonstrate our campus' capacity for interdisciplinarity as the norm in research, education and outreach, and to prepare the global health leaders of tomorrow with a sensitivity to globalization, an experience with international partnership, and a mindset of interdisciplinary collaboration. Critical to this program was the identification of a core institutional partner – Njala University fit the vision perfectly.

With support from the College of Medicine at Urbana's O'Morchoe Leadership Fellowship, three MD/PhD students – Gregory Damhorst (Bioengineering), Elise Duwe (Sociology), and Kenneth Long (Bioengineering) – participated in an initial GHI delegation to Njala University in February 2014

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to explore opportunities for collaborative research, outreach and educational activities around global health. Additional delegates were selected with support from the Center for Global Studies, Scientific Animations without Borders (SAWBO), and the University YMCA, including Oliver Ferguson (Agricultural and Consumer Economics), Professor Barry Pittendrigh (Entomology, SAWBO), Dr. Julia Bello-Bravo (Center for African Studies, SAWBO), and Gary Gladschagel (University YMCA).

This delegation sought to explore opportunities to expand the existing relationship with Sierra Leonean partners around a global health theme. Our work began before even setting foot in Sierra Leone. Roughly one week before leaving, we met with Prof. Bill Thompson, retired faculty from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who led the Illinois team for two years when Njala was first established. En route to Freetown – on a layover in the Brussels airport – we met with Raphael Frankfurter, Executive Director of Wellbody Alliance, an NGO working on health issues in the Kenema District of Sierra Leone. We arrived late in the evening in Freetown and traveled the next morning to the main Njala University campus, where we explored the campus with current Njala students and toured several agricultural experiments. We spent the following day in Bo, one of Sierra Leone’s largest cities, where Njala University has a second campus focused on health sciences and training healthcare professionals. There we met with faculty and staff, including Dr. Douda Shareef, head of the Nursing Department, and Dr. Bashiru Koroma, Dean of the School of Community Health Sciences.

Our hosts took us to visit Mercy Methodist Hospital during our time in Bo, where a PhD candidate at the School of Tropical Medicine in Liverpool runs a small but cutting-edge research laboratory. Later in the week, we would return to this hospital for further discussion with its medical director. Near the end of our time in Bo, we visited an abandoned hospital that had been set up by a Sierra Leonean who was tragically killed in a car accident. The beautiful facility he had built was sadly vacated by its staff shortly after his death and had sat empty ever since.

The majority of our time was spent on the main Njala University campus. During that time, we toured the campus hospital and met with students, staff and faculty working in a variety of disciplines. We learned directly from Njala faculty and students about the importance of the relationship with the University of Illinois. A small number of faculty have made a meaningful impact through visits to Njala during which they taught classes and seminars and established mentorship relationships. A few faculty continue to e-mentor PhD students after their return to Illinois.

At the end of our time in Sierra Leone, we returned to Freetown and visited with representatives from a few more organizations, including the YMCA of Sierra Leone. One of these organizations was Metabiota, Inc., which has a field office in Freetown and is working on prevention and treatment of Lassa Fever. Metabiota is a viral forecasting company started by Dr. Nathan Wolfe, one of the guests who visited Illinois as part of the high-profile seminar series previously organized collaboratively by GHI and CGS with cross-campus support. On our last evening in Freetown, we attended the Njala University 50th Anniversary Celebration – another opportunity to meet new friends and colleagues and to celebrate the relationship with Illinois.

Outcomes

In addition to learning about Sierra Leone, Njala University, and the nature of the existing relationship with Illinois, the goal of this trip was to explore opportunities for partnerships around global health which mutually benefit both institutions, their students, and their communities. Several ideas have been formulated and discussed since our return, and we highlight a few of them here:

International Healthcare Experience and Mentoring Program – exposure to healthcare in resource-limited settings can be a valuable and challenging experience for medical students. We sought to discover opportunities that would provide students in the College of Medicine at Urbana with a meaningful supplement to their medical education on the Urbana campus. For M1 students, we believe the Njala partnership provides a framework for a valuable experience observing healthcare at the Njala University Hospital, Mercy Methodist Hospital, and other area health centers, as well as an opportunity for interacting with other health professions students. Meanwhile, MD/PhD students in their M4 year on the Urbana campus often have the flexibility to arrange an international experience. We will be attempting to establish a tradition of M4 MD/PhD students visiting Njala University to engage the campus in their area of expertise through teaching seminars and/or mentoring students, while also taking the opportunity to observe healthcare in Sierra Leone.

Interdisciplinary Capstone Experience for Undergraduates – after the February trip, discussions with Jenny Amos, director of Undergraduate Programs for the Bioengineering Department and coordinator of the senior design project class for the department, led to us writing and receiving an Africa Initiative grant of \$5,000. This money was used to support a follow-up trip to the Bo campus of Njala in June when Kenny and Dr. Amos traveled to meet with Njala faculty and establish a pilot program. Recognizing the significant challenges facing the healthcare system in the Bo and Moyamba districts where Njala is located, this experience will allow undergraduate students to work together to develop healthcare technologies to address needs identified by healthcare providers in the area. While the plan for the program is to use interdisciplinary teams of students from departments across campus, this pilot program will be comprised of solely Bioengineering students from Illinois, and Nursing, Community Health Sciences, and MPH students from Njala. The pilot has begun, and the students are currently selecting their first project.

Focal Point Program – upon return from Sierra Leone, we drafted a proposal to the annual Focal Point program run by the Graduate College at the University of Illinois. We were awarded a grant of \$15,000 to continue to build the Njala partnership through arranging visits from Njala faculty, hosting seminars, and organizing a campus-wide symposium. Also included in this program is a series of workshops to catalyze the development of new courses in global health, and to share those courses with colleagues at Njala via online resources.

The outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in the summer of 2014 has forced a shift in some of our plans. While we are doing everything we can to aide our colleagues and friends in Sierra Leone, we are also attempting to use the situation to generate interest in the Njala partnership on our campus. For example, we have organized an “Ebola and Global Health Teach-In” panel discussion with the Center for Global Studies, Center for African Studies, SAWBO, and the University YMCA. This discussion highlighted the growing relationship with Njala, and was an opportunity to educate the broader community about the outbreak.

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To submit an essay for publication in the Policy Brief series, please contact Jeremie Smith: smith193@illinois.edu (217) 244-9352.

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Center for Global Studies

303 International Studies Bldg.
910 S. Fifth Street, MC-402
Champaign, IL 61820 USA
<http://cgs.illinois.edu>