

The Core Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program: Sierra Leone (Sub-Saharan Africa Region)

Fulbright Project Statement: Developing Community Engagement Capacities at Njala University and Grand Valley State University

Objectives and Activities:

This project is situated at the intersection of my teaching, my expertise in applied anthropology, and my international interests that draws upon several elements of my professional life. In the late 1980s, just before the war began, I conducted anthropological research in a Mende village in Sierra Leone, focusing on the impacts of an inland valley swamp rice development project. Since then I have been at Grand Valley State University as a professor and researcher in economic and agricultural anthropology and interdisciplinary studies. Over the past 15 years, I have involved the academy with local communities by engaging students in community-based learning and experiential education through teaching methodology courses, directing internships and field placements, teaching field schools, and working with local farmer populations and markets. In recent years I have become familiar with transformational learning and community partnerships that are deeply grounded in collaboration, principles of social justice and mutual capacity building. The project I am proposing here involves returning to Sierra Leone to teach and work with colleagues at Njala University with the goal of facilitating collaborations among students, staff, faculty and local communities to enhance transformative experiential learning and community development at both Njala University and GVSU.

Specifically, my project encompasses three sets of activities, all of which have been identified by Njala University leadership as priority areas for the university. First, in conjunction with faculty colleagues in the School of Social Sciences, I will teach two courses: Program Evaluation Methodology and Community-based Action Research. Second, this teaching will be complemented by additional work, at the level of the university more generally, to enhance faculty and student capacity in the areas of community-based action research, community-based learning, and experiential education, particularly in the priority areas of agrarian development, food security, and environmental sustainability (Kecskes 2009; Caswell et al. 2011). This work will include offering workshops and seminars with staff and faculty in any or all of the following areas: incorporating experiential and community-based learning into classes, action research methodology, and program evaluation and assessment. Third, I will work to help the university establish a Center of Community Engagement, working in partnership with the person at Njala designated to lead that initiative. In this area, I could work with faculty to develop specific community-based learning courses or course modules as well as help to set up the policies and practices for a viable Center. This process will involve exchange and collaboration with Grand Valley's Office of Community Engagement (<http://www.gvsu.edu/community/>) and the Sustainable Community Development Initiative (<http://www.gvsu.edu/sustainability/community-engagement-141.htm>).

My project positions me to apply what I have learned at GVSU in order to assist NU in building curricular capacity and partnerships in line with university priorities for engaged student learning and career leadership. The project is mutually benefitting, resulting in significant

outcomes not just for Njala University, but for GVSU and for me professionally. I will be able to apply my experiences in Sierra Leone to my own teaching, research and curricular development, and will work with the Office of Community Engagement and Padnos International Center at GVSU to develop programs that train students, staff and faculty at GVSU on community engagement, both locally and internationally.

Alignment with Host Institution's Priorities and Issues:

This project aligns with the urgent need to support the rebuilding of Sierra Leone's public universities during the current post-conflict development phase. As Vice Chancellor Abu Sesay's letter of invitation states, a Fulbright grant will provide a valuable resource to help Njala University meet its goals and priorities for curricular development, partnership, and community engagement. NU is rebuilding on the site of Njala University College, which was established in 1964, using the model of the American land grant university. Once a vibrant institution that attracted students from across Africa, Njala was all but destroyed during the civil war, losing 70-80 percent of its residential, teaching, and research capacity. Thanks in large part to the leadership of Vice-Chancellor Abu Sesay, the institution is now beginning to thrive again.

Major priorities of NU today include improving quality and efficiency of teaching and learning, rehabilitating and rebuilding the Njala campus, producing highly trained human resource base for national development, enhancing research capacities of faculty and students through research collaboration, and gaining exposure to best practices in higher education for student learning that engages sustainable community development. These efforts are very consistent with the analytical framework developed by HERANA (Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa), which promotes a role for universities in economic development, both as instruments for development agendas and as engines of development (Cloete et al. 2011, Cloete, Maassen and Moja 2013). In short, the university is a critical institution for the instruction, production and dissemination of knowledge for national social and economic development.

Moreover, community engagement, defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education as "the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity," plays a critical role in this educational framework. Today, NU is in the process of rebuilding and strengthening its educational infrastructure in ways that are very much aligned with the HERANA framework. It is expanding its curriculum, training students and faculty, and building the structures and practices of community engagement locally, regionally, and nationally. This Fulbright project is thus part of a broader project of developing a new model for tertiary educational institutions that emphasizes knowledge generation, learning capacities, and inter-institutional collaboration (Castells 1991, World Bank 2002; Duval 2013).

Background and Preparation:

My research over the past 30 years has addressed agricultural anthropology and economic development, having taken me to Mexico, Venezuela, Sierra Leone, and India. Two of my research and personal interests are applied agricultural anthropology and connecting the classroom to the community through high-impact learning experiences. For the past 10 years, my interests have focused on food systems and food security, both in Michigan and abroad. During this time I conducted two GVSU ethnographic field projects involving 40 students who worked with regional farmers and markets. Such projects include "West Michigan Farmers Markets: Increasing Vitality for Farmers and Consumers" (2003), "West Michigan Farmers Markets and Community Outreach" (2007), and most recently "West Michigan Farmers Markets and Food Assistance Outreach (2011-)", which explores food insecurity and equitable access to fresh food through government food assistance programs aimed at serving low-income populations through farmers markets. At GVSU, I have taught undergraduate courses on applied anthropology, globalization, field methods, research design, and migration, and mentored student independent research projects. In recent years, I have directed dozens of internships and helped establish our current department internship program. My expertise and experiences in student learning, connecting the classroom to the community, and developing and implementing methodologies grounded in community engagement and collaboration prepare me for their application to the context of Sierra Leone and Njala University.

In addition, in all my courses, I instill an anthropological approach to learning and to understanding diversity. This approach will benefit students at NU, as they do at GVSU. In my courses student are engaged in hands-on experiences and problem-solving through a critical thinking framework. Skills learned by students include:

- knowledge about biological, ecological, and cultural factors that influence human behavior;
- theoretical approaches and practical methods for enhancing cross-cultural understanding;
- skills in social research, qualitative interviewing and fieldwork, as well as experience working in groups and writing both descriptive reports and analytical paper;
- the ability to analyze the root causes of social problems and apply a problem-solving approach to the real world;
- the ability to work towards solutions with people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds; and
- social ease in strange situations, social agility, social sensitivity, and cultural competence.

These are also qualities that I take with me to Sierra Leone. They do not guarantee complete adjustment to the university and cultural context at NU, but they provide a solid grounding for on-going adjustment, flexibility, patience, and resourcefulness.

I am well prepared for a teaching Fulbright at NU. I conducted past research in Sierra Leone and elsewhere, in a context of limited resources. I am also familiar with the current environment at NU. Recently (December 2012), I returned to Sierra Leone to explore the possibility of applying for this Fulbright during my full academic-year sabbatical leave. I travelled with my colleague and wife (Kiran Cunningham, Kalamazoo College) to initiate partnerships and exchange. During

that visit, I met with Vice-Chancellor Abu Sesay about my prospective project. I also had formal meetings with Dr. Abdul Mansaray, the Dean of Post-Graduate Studies at NU, and with Dr. M.T. Lahai, Dean of the School of Agriculture. Together we explored areas of possible collaboration and student/staff/faculty training, including sharing applied methodologies, developing practices and pedagogies of community engagement, and supervising student applied research projects.

Moreover, in May 2013, I helped organize and participated in a symposium at Kalamazoo College called “Reconnecting the Academy in Sierra Leone and the Diaspora: Creating Synergies that Support the Strategic Visions of Sierra Leone’s Universities.” The symposium was attended by more than 30 participants – Sierra Leoneans and scholars of Sierra Leone, as well as Vice-Chancellor Abu Sesay and his counterpart at the University of Sierra Leone, Vice Chancellor Jonas Redwood-Sawyerr. One of the action priorities emerging from several days of conversation was the importance of facilitating new curriculum tied to community engagement, and creating a synergy between public universities in Sierra Leone and our own departments and institutions here in the U.S. This Fulbright proposal implements these objectives.

While I am positioned to bring my experiences and anthropological training to Njala, I am also culturally sensitive and thoughtful about how new ideas/technology/processes are applied. My role will not be the anthropologist as 'cultural expert'; my collaboration with students, staff and faculty at Njala University will be built on the premise that they are the experts, aware of local assets and dynamics. By working together we will integrate methodologies of engagement appropriate to the Sierra Leonian institutional context.

In summary, my role at Njala University is to sort out approaches to student learning and to assist university faculty and staff in thinking about new ways of engaging - appropriate to the context of the institution and local communities. During this process, the shape and types of feasible projects will come into view. I can foresee projects involving to internships, working with NGOs, and student/faculty research conducted in the town adjacent to the university. With my interest in agricultural development, I could help faculty design agricultural outreach projects, perhaps working with the local Agricultural Business Centre (ABC).

Outcomes:

The outcomes and benefits are many and mutual, emerging from the myriad possible connections between me and students/faculty, departments, and community members, both in the U.S. and in Sierra Leone. My project positions me to apply what I have learned at GVSU in order to assist NU in building curricular capacity and partnerships in line with university priorities for engaged student learning and career leadership. The project also benefits GVSU and me professionally. I will be able to apply my experiences in Sierra Leone to my own teaching, research and curricular development. My projects will produce teaching resources and training modules, which can be used here by other faculty. I can apply these products and a newfound knowledge to teaching the department’s methods course (ANT 300), preparing an ethnographic field school (ANT 307), and even facilitating a future study abroad experience for

students. Finally, I would like to develop an applied anthropology course on action research and community engagement.

I will share my training with colleagues and create collaborations at GVSU. For example, I will work with the Office of Community Engagement at GVSU, further developing my interest in fostering programs to training students, staff and faculty on community engagement. I would like to give campus and community presentations on the results of my experiences and collaborations, and disseminate the lessons learned from the Sierra Leone case.

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