

U Of I Partners In Rebuilding Top University In Sierra Leone

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On May 6, University of Illinois officials signed a memorandum of understanding with Njala University of the West African country of Sierra Leone to partner in the rebuilding of the university it helped establish 46 years ago.

"The relationship between University of Illinois' College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES) and Njala University being solidified today through the signing of this memorandum of understanding reignites a relationship begun in 1964," said Robert Hauser, dean of the College of ACES. "During that time, many of our faculty stepped away from their duties here at the university to spend time in Sierra Leone training and establishing that institution, and we have a strong allegiance and affinity for Njala today."

Njala University is Sierra Leone's premier school for agriculture, education, community health, and environmental sciences. The university, formerly called Njala University College, was established with assistance from the U of I and financial support from the U.S. Agency for International Development to provide the education, training, and research necessary to strengthen the nation's agricultural systems and improve the quality of its food supply. Unfortunately, the university's campus was reduced to rubble during a devastating civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002.

Once a thriving educational institution, Njala University lost about 80 percent of its infrastructure during the 11-year conflict. Talented faculty, staff, and students scattered to locations inside and outside the country. Now, after 15 years of being left abandoned, Njala University administrators and staff are working to rebuild the institution's infrastructure and academic programs. U of I College of ACES faculty and staff have pledged to assist Njala University in its efforts to rebuild its respected educational and research programs.

Njala University's Vice Chancellor Abu Sesay participated in the celebrated memorandum of understanding signing last week on behalf of his university and spoke on the importance of the Njala University and U of I partnership.

"We believe the future of Njala University depends on our capacity to plug into the global community of learning," Sesay said. "We put a premium on the establishment of international partnerships because it's through those partnerships we believe we can realize our mission of becoming a world-recognized university. And if we are going to do that, we think the best place to start is here in Illinois, a place with historical ties. The name 'Illinois' means so much to my country."

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Following the establishment of Njala University College, several Sierra Leoneans received their master's and PhD degrees from the U of I. Since the end of the conflict in Sierra Leone, many of them have been encouraging U of I administrators and faculty to get reengaged to help rebuild the once flourishing educational institution.

Internationally recognized agricultural research and development specialist Eugene Terry, a Sierra Leonean who received his PhD in plant pathology from the U of I in 1970, attended the document signing. Terry is leading collaborative efforts of faculty, staff, and graduate students from Njala University and the U of I to bring the university back to its former distinction and strengthen programs at both institutions. Terry currently serves as the Implementing Director of the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, charged with the establishment of a public-private sector partnership organization for agricultural technology transfer.

Over the past two years, Paul McNamara, a U of I agricultural economist, has traveled and led student trips to Sierra Leone, and in particular Njala University, to begin building joint educational and research programs that benefit both universities. Njala University officials believe this renewed partnership will strengthen their university's ability to compete for research grants, development funding, and other resources to rebuild infrastructure and train staff.

"It is important for people to understand how critical this translational ability within a country like Sierra Leone is, the ability to take outside ideas and technologies and employ them in a local context," McNamara said. "When you think about agriculture, you might have a rice seed variety that works well in Nigeria, for example, but it may need further fine-tuning and adaptation for use in Sierra Leone. This requires people who are trained in agricultural science to do this kind of work. There is a role for higher education partnerships to assist in making this happen. And, that's one we seek to fulfill.

"The University of Illinois is a world leader in higher education, including agricultural education and research and a host of other fields. Not only do we have a lot to offer, but we greatly benefit from these types of partnerships too," McNamara added.

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