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Concept Note for the Africa-US Universities Conference

Hosted by the African Centre for the Study of the United States, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

July 2 – 3, 2025.

Introduction and Background

This concept note outlines the framework for an Africa-US Universities Conference aimed at fostering collaboration between students, faculty, management, and communities between the continent and the United States. The conference will be held at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in a hybrid format, combining in-person and virtual participation.

The conference emerges from the shared recognition of the need to build stronger academic, cultural, and institutional ties between HBCUs and African universities. These partnerships aim to enhance mutual understanding, academic citizenship, and collaborative initiatives that address the challenges and opportunities presented by a rapidly changing global context.

The conference builds on efforts towards the establishment of an Africa-US Universities Network. This idea emerged in late 2022 during the US-Africa Leaders' Summit held in Washington DC. The initial partners in the initiative are Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, University of Southern California, Washington Program; the African Centre for the Study of the U.S., University the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; the Center for African Studies, Howard University; the Institute for

African Studies, George Washington University; and the Public Diplomacy Council of America. Under the "Africa-U.S. Initiative" banner, the partners have worked with multiple other individuals to organize "Africa's Future Series" every last Monday of the month since December 2022. These institutions convened a side event entitled "Africa's Future: University Partnerships, Technologies and Democracy, Investments, and Open Diplomacy" in December 2022. Between 2021 and 2023, several African scholars representing ten universities[i] were convened. This culminated in a hybrid event on the theme of "Africa's Future: University Partnership" in April 2023, with African speakers representing the University of Nairobi, Strathmore University Business School (Kenya), University Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), the West African Research Center (WARC, Senegal) Unicaf University (Malawi), and Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia). In September 2023, a virtual consultative meeting bringing together over twenty representatives of US universities was convened, with excellent ideas which form part of this conference presented.

Goal and Objectives

- Bring together African and U.S. universities to innovate new ways of studying the intricate, multilayered, and evolving engagements between Africa and the U.S. in the dynamic and evolving geopolitical setting.

- Provide a platform for dialogue on shared challenges and opportunities in education, research, and cultural exchange.
- Strengthen partnerships between African and US universities through joint programs and initiatives.
- Explore strategies for leveraging academic collaborations to address global issues such as racial justice, sustainability, and technological innovation.
- Facilitate networking opportunities between scholars, educators, and policymakers from both continents.

- Create a mechanism for the coordination of an Africa-U.S. university-led program of activities to close gaps between academia, industry/businesses, and governments, think tanks, civil society, and international organizations interested in Africa-U.S. relations.

Conference Format

The conference will adopt a hybrid format, allowing participation both in person at the University of Witwatersrand and virtually via Zoom. This approach maximizes accessibility and inclusivity for participants across Africa, the United States, and beyond.

Proposed Topics for Discussion

1. **The Role of Universities in Strengthening Africa-Diaspora Relations**
   - Mapping existing diaspora initiatives and partnerships.
   - Exploring diaspora, African, Africana and black studies in the US.
   - Introducing American studies in Africa.
   - Tapping diaspora alumni in Africa and the US.

2. **Innovations in Joint Academic Programs and Student Exchange Initiatives**
   - Mapping past, existing and potential university partnerships and networks.
   - Sharing successful US-Africa partnership frameworks.
   - Innovating funding models for excelling African students to study in the US (particularly STEM subjects) and vice versa.
   - Applying for research grants, joint responses to calls for funding, and other innovative resource mobilization strategies.
   - Undertaking joint research, teaching, pedagogic, and mentorship initiatives.
   - Facilitating joint appointments for African and U.S. scholars.
   - Initiating joint degree programs and curriculum development.
   - Rolling out semester abroad and summer/winter school programs.
   - Developing student and faculty exchanges.
   - Establishing African and US satellite campuses on either side.
   - Increasing accessibility to teaching and learning resources.
   - Partnering with philanthropies, foundations (public and private), High Net Worth Individuals, think tanks, international organizations, and faith-based organizations.
   - Creating innovative avenues for doctoral and postdoctoral students and researchers.

3. **Addressing Global Challenges Through Collaborative Research and Teaching**

- ○ Unpacking shifting global geopolitics and their implications for Africa-US relations.

- ○ Responding to the climate change crisis and the challenge of energy transition.

- ○ Innovative approaches, disease control, health, and medical supplies.

- ○ Mitigating armed conflicts and their effects.

- ○ Tapping the potential of youth, women, energy and initiatives for development.

- ○ Facilitating trade for economic renewal.

- ○ Securing human rights, democracy and governance.

- ○ Cities and urbanization.

- ○ Leveraging technology and innovation, particularly in the AI era.

- ○ Transferring knowledge and skills and using domestic innovations across sectors.

4. **Decolonizing Education and Advancing Equity in Academic Spaces**

- ○ Theorizing African and diaspora concepts and methods.

- ○ Innovating funding models for decolonial education initiatives.

- ○ Considering transregional knowledge production and networks.

- ○ Using multi-, inter-, cross-disciplinary approaches.

- ○ Enhancing the impact and relevance of education for socio-economic development.

- ○ Producing knowledge using local and indigenous sources.

- ○ Ensuring ethics and values in partnerships.

5. **Cultural Diplomacy and the Power of Arts in Bridging Communities**

- ○ Convening co-productions in the cultural spheres.

- ○ Engaging communications in artistic work.

- ○ Linking cultural diplomacy and educational diplomacy.

- ○ Initiating new Intercultural learning projects and sustaining existing ones.

- ○ Addressing cultural and language competencies across African languages.

6. **Building a Knowledge Economy Through University-Industry-Government Partnerships**

- ○ Exploring models for academia-industry-government partnerships.

- ○ Connecting formal diplomacy with sub-national levels, and non-state-actor diplomacy.

- ○ Creating internships for students in the US and African organizations.

- ○ Mapping and aligning industry needs with curricula.

- ○ Encouraging the private sector to support initiatives.

- ○ Placement of faculty in African and US businesses.

- Placing of students and faculty with cutting-edge knowledge and skills in African governments (national/federal and local/municipal).
- Researching and publishing corporate case studies.
- Training African and U.S. state and non-state actors.

7. **Creating Pathways for Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**
- Converting university research projects into implementable projects.
- Boosting community and SME projects.
- Advancing African and US start-ups.

8. **The Future of Digital Learning in Africa and the US**
- Using AI and emerging technologies for education.
- Domesticating AI and emerging technologies as learning platforms.
- Using virtual platforms to connect faculty and students.

Proposed Activities

- **Keynote Addresses**: Delivered by prominent scholars, policymakers, and thought leaders from HBCUs and African universities.
- **Panel Discussions**: Featuring experts and practitioners discussing the proposed topics.
- **Breakout Sessions**: Focused group discussions to explore specific themes in-depth.
- **Networking Events**: Opportunities for informal engagement and partnership development.
- **Research Presentations**: Showcasing collaborative projects and innovative ideas.

Expected Outcomes

- A formalized network of African universities to sustain ongoing collaboration.
- Concrete action plans for joint academic programs, exchanges, and research initiatives.
- A repository of knowledge and resources to support long-term partnerships.
- Increased visibility and recognition of Africa and US collaborations in global academic and policy spaces.

Next Steps

- Circulation of this concept note as a form of a call for panels and roundtables.
- Formation of an organizing committee with representatives from African and US universities.
- Convening of an information session in early April 2025.
- Development of a budget for the conference.
- Development of a detailed agenda and program for the conference.
- Outreach to potential participants, speakers, and sponsors.
- Establishment of a conference website to facilitate registration and information dissemination.

Conclusion

This conference represents a critical opportunity to strengthen ties between African and American academic institutions, fostering mutual growth and collaboration. By addressing pressing global challenges and leveraging shared cultural heritage, the Africa-Universities Conference aims to create a lasting impact on higher education and society at large.

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[i] Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, Makerere University, Uganda, Pan Atlantic University (Lagos Business School), Nigeria, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, University of Zambia, University of Ghana, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal, University of Nairobi, Kenya, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.