

Strengthening Academic Networks in Africa and its Diaspora

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April 2022



Carnegie African Diaspora
Fellowship Program





Introduction

The Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP) enables exchanges between academic scholars in the United States and Canada (Fellows) and African higher education institutions (Host Fellows), expanding and activating diverse professional networks that serve as platforms for communication, resource sharing, and strategic collaborations. The CADFP aims to build the capacity of African higher education institutions by creating cross-sectoral partnerships with scholars of African descent in the African diaspora. The CADFP model allows Fellows and Host Fellows to receive the award up to three times, providing opportunities to leverage diverse networks that build on previous relationships or establish new ones.

CADFP provides opportunities for networks in various ways. First, Fellows and Host Fellows who have worked together in the past can submit a joint project to continue a previous relationship and strengthen ties or networks created before the program. Second, CADFP fosters new collaborations of Fellows and Host Fellows who have not worked together in the past, fostering innovative collaboration across countries and disciplines. Third, multiple years of funding allow Fellows to connect with more than one Host Fellows, spreading networks among African Host Fellows that further sustain networks in similar fields of study or across similar areas of interest.

This network brief aims to analyze networks strengthened or established through the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program. First, we describe the revitalization or creation of networks among the Fellows and Host Fellows during and after the fellowship. The brief then explores findings related to the impact of the networks on broader stakeholders at African higher education institutions, including students and faculty. We conclude with promising practices from CADFP Fellows on sustaining an international academic network, which is helpful for other international scholarship and fellowship programs looking to foster international research and collaboration.

Methodology

Focus Groups and Interviews. The Research, Evaluation, and Learning (REL) Unit at the Institute of International Education conducted four focus groups with CADFP alumni at the CADFP Alumni Convening in Washington, D.C., in October 2021. All CADFP alumni who attended the Alumni Convening were invited to participate in a focus group session, and 28 alumni participated in the focus groups. Two REL facilitators held one-hour focus groups in-person, with these sessions recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The REL team followed up with four CADFP Fellows in March 2022 who had participated in the Alumni Convening focus groups. Interview participants were selected based on their focus group insights and considering demographic diversity that reflected the fields of specialization, host country, home country, and gender of CADFP Fellows. The interviews sought to understand more deeply participants' networks, their experiences expanding their network through their fellowship, and the subsequent impact.

Analysis. The REL team reviewed and coded the focus groups and interviews using an inductive coding process to identify emergent themes related to CADFP networks and promising practices to sustain international academic networks.

Limitations. The REL team considered the assumptions and limitations in conducting this research. First, the CADFP program model is such that Fellows in the program are established academic professionals in the African Diaspora, chosen in part for their African academic networks. Therefore, our research assumed that most CADFP Fellows already had African academic networks before CADFP. We would analyze the program's role in strengthening or creating new networks. A limitation of the findings is that the CADFP alumni were self-selected into focus groups. Thus, we cannot broaden the findings of this research to apply to all CADFP Fellows and Host Fellows or other programs. In drafting the promising practices for how to sustain an international academic network, for example, these insights reflect the findings and reflections of participants in this research.

Findings

An entry point into our findings is how CADFP Fellows learned about the CADFP fellowship and how they created academic networks for program selection and collaboration. The REL team asked CADFP Fellows how they learned about the fellowship and which networks they leveraged for this purpose.

First, some CADFP Fellows learned about the fellowship from their North America-based academic and professional networks. These included, for example, the National Association of Nurses in North America, the Fulbright Association, their friends, or colleagues at their U.S. or Canadian higher education institutions. Within these networks, CADFP Fellows often built on relationships with colleagues, students, and friends who were part of the African Diaspora to learn about and apply for the fellowship. As the CADFP expanded with subsequent cohorts of Fellows, many individuals also learned about the fellowship from other CADFP alumni.

How did you learn about the CADFP Fellowship?

A colleague of mine where I did my first Masters. He had participated in [a previous CADFP] cohort, and he told me that it was a good thing and that I should participate as well.

– CADFP Diaspora Alumnus, Public university in Nigeria

I became aware of this fellowship because of a student of mine. He had seen an announcement and sent it to me. And then, my friend and colleague at a sister institution who had done the fellowship also called my attention to it.

– CADFP Diaspora Alumnus, Public university in Nigeria

Other CADFP Fellows learned about the fellowship through conferences they attended in the country where they would have their Host Fellow. As travelers often back to the African continent, these CADFP Fellows also had pre-existing networks through their previous academic, professional, and personal networks. The CADFP fellowship, for some, became a way to bring to fruition the ideas between the CADFP Fellow and the Host Fellow.

I was invited by the Host University, my former employer, as I was a young lecturer there years ago. They remembered me and thought I could be a real asset to the Department of Special Education.

– CADFP Diaspora Alumnus, Public university in Nigeria



How did CADFP activate academic connections?

The Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship revitalized existing networks and connections for Fellows and Host Fellows.

Discussions with CADFP Fellows confirmed that most came to the CADFP with pre-existing networks rooted in their personal and professional networks. Most CADFP Fellows had completed their undergraduate and one graduate degree in Africa, usually a Masters. Their trajectory then led them to the United States or Canada, where they usually pursued a post-graduate degree, such as a doctorate or law degree. As current academics in the United States and Canada, most CADFP Fellows we spoke to left Africa as early professionals, with varying levels of connection back to their African academic networks. Beyond Africa, their networks also included African Diaspora colleagues in the United States and Canada, often through country- or industry-based connections. Regardless of the location of the network, CADFP Fellows came to the program with fully functional networks, either in Africa or the African Diaspora.

When I left Africa as a young professional, my networks were already old. Returning as a Carnegie Fellow gave me access to new networks and woke up old ones.

—CADFP Diaspora Alumnus, public university in Kenya

Returning to Africa to conduct academic research, curriculum development, or teaching provided CADFP Fellows with a revitalization of their African network at a deeper level. Through their CADFP experience, CADFP Fellows and Host Fellows were able to activate old networks. CADFP Fellows noted setting up check-in conversations and inviting former colleagues to their Host Institution to seek ways to collaborate. One CADFP Fellow noted that he left Nigeria as a mid-career professional with a seemingly robust professional network. However, when he returned to Nigeria as a CADFP Fellow, he realized that most of his former academic contacts and mentors were retired or deceased. He was pleasantly surprised weeks into his fellowship when he was introduced to a neighboring university's Vice-Chancellor, the Fellow's former student at his African institution. This activated connection resulted in seminars and guest lectures for the CADFP Fellow at this neighboring university in Nigeria. CADFP Fellows were able to activate existing networks and use these to further additional collaboration.

The Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship fostered new networks between CADFP Fellows and Host Fellows.

In addition to sustaining networks already created, CADFP also succeeded in helping Fellows, and Host Fellows create *new networks*. Sometimes, this was directly connected to the CADFP fellowship opportunity, as CADFP Fellows and Host Fellows who had not collaborated before got the opportunity to do so through the program. Focus group respondents spoke about the new networks they created by traveling to new Host Fellows African nations, specifically for the CADFP fellowship.

Other Fellows returned to their mother country but collaborated with a new Host Fellow. One Fellow left Nigeria as a mid-career lawyer with a network built around his legal connections. During the CADFP fellowship, he had planned to work with his *alma mater*; however, the collaboration did not work out. He completed his CADFP fellowship at a university that he had previously driven past on his daily commute but had never actually entered. He built his academic network during the fellowship and collaborated with scholars to create a conflict resolution program for his Nigeria Host Fellow.

Many CADFP Fellows noted building new networks with their students or Host Fellow colleagues, the next generation of academics, or experts in their host countries. Many CADFP Fellows taught and mentored students during their fellowship, bridging connections in fields of study between the United States, Canada, and the Host Fellow. Even after their fellowship ended, CADFP Fellows supported their Host Fellow students by advising them through their dissertation, sitting on dissertation committees, and supporting students wishing to pursue their higher education in the United States. In some instances, CADFP Fellows noted that students from their Host Fellow institution collaborated with students from their U.S. or Canadian home institution.

My connections to the doctoral students [were] great. I was holding weekly seminars. The students at my host institution became aware of other student scholars in the region and at my home institution for collaboration.

– CADFP Alumnus from a public university in Tanzania

What is the value of CADFP in academic networks?

CADFP elevated the professional and academic reputations of CADFP Fellows and Host Fellows in their networks.

CADFP Diaspora Fellows described receiving the fellowship as a career-defining moment, increasing their reputation as scholars in their global academic networks. This resulted in opportunities in their field, more funding, more collaboration on projects, and scaling up their existing projects. Fellows who participated in the focus groups indicated they were invited to give lectures at their Host Fellows' during their fellowship beyond the obligations of their fellowship deliverables. Post-fellowship capacity-building collaborations with host institutions often expanded beyond fellowship projects. 90% of fellows still collaborated with their host institutions on capacity-building projects, and 70% of respondents to the alumni surveys had indicated that they travel to Africa outside of CADFP, most often to visit an African institution.

Fellows also emphasized that this activation of networks, as a result of CADFP, also led to new grants, new resources, new teams, and the ability to produce additional academic outputs. For example, a host and diaspora fellow who had worked together before the CADFP fellowship deepened their collaboration through the fellowship. They developed a hydraulic field station and worked on water, sanitation, and hygiene projects. They leveraged their successful partnership to receive follow-on grants of \$45,000 to carry out their work.

Collaboration made us like a family, and you know, an international family is not so easy to get, especially when it comes to research. There are now frequent visits between my home and host universities.

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Kenya

CADFP alumni collaborate and actively engage with the CADFP network.

The CADFP Fellow network now includes 584 academics in the United States and Canada and 500 Host Fellows and collaborators at 203 institutions of higher learning in sub-Saharan Africa. Up to five years after their fellowships, almost all respondents (96%) to alumni surveys continued to contact hosts, and most (90%) still collaborated on capacity-building projects.

The CADFP network was an integral source for new collaborations. In one focus group, a CADFP Fellow described the creation of networks through CADFP as a stone thrown in a pool of water. The initial ripples were the Fellows themselves, who went to their Host Fellows and created their networks. The Fellows are now throwing stones and helping their colleagues and students create their networks due to CADFP. This multiplier effect is a testament to CADFP. In the 2018 CADFP Alumni Study, 53% of Fellows communicated with their colleagues at their Host Fellows at least once or twice a month, even after the fellowship ended. 73% of Fellows said they had student contacts at other higher education institutions in Africa.

Because of Carnegie, we are not strangers in Africa anymore. We can go to universities, and they know us as reputed fellows and the collaboration ensues...”

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Nigeria

Since their fellowship, 72 respondents (55%) indicated that CADFP was important to collaborations with 115 institutions beyond their host institutions, located in 16 countries. CADFP Fellows noted using this multiplier effect to give back to the African continent and the countries where they completed their fellowship. Collaboration between Fellows and their Host Fellows resulted in new courses, curricula, conference invitations, and manuscripts. Fellows also noted new collaborations between colleagues in their home and host institutions that did not require the direct involvement of the Fellow.

My host institution colleagues have access to my home institution colleagues and are freely collaborating on their own. They are working on manuscripts and research projects. I am not needed to make further connections anymore. That is the goal – they have outgrown me.

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Nigeria

Diaspora Fellows also commented that the 2021 CADFP Alumni Convening was vital to their motivation to give back. The gathering was one of the few times or the first time in their careers that they saw an assembly of African diaspora scholars in one location. This union helped them collaborate on research projects, proposals, and manuscripts amongst themselves, with each others’ Host Fellows, and consider how they could give back to the African continent.

Carnegie has done something that has never been done (in my career), to come to one particular space, and you have not only Nigerian Scholars but African scholars to interact with. So that is something that should not be taken for granted. I am particularly delighted to have the opportunity to be part of this network.

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Nigeria



What makes a successful international academic network?

Creating ongoing relationships based on mutual understanding, admiration, and support is essential to any successful network, whether in person or online. Add international and academic dimensions and the need to consider cultural context and sustainability, which makes the basis for successful collaboration in CADFP. We asked CADFP Fellows in our focus groups to reflect on the elements of a successful, sustainable international academic network. What has made their networks continue? What promising practices have they put in place to ensure that their networks with African counterparts are inclusive and sustainable? We identified three cross-cutting themes.

Mutual Respect

CADFP Fellows most frequently mentioned respect as the most important tenet for sustaining and nourishing relationships and networks with their African Host Fellows. The combination of showing respect and, in turn, receiving respect resulted in deeper networks and collaboration. A Fellow expressed that respect – giving and receiving – was necessary and integral for any CADFP project to move forward.

Through respect, CADFP Fellows were able to create mutually inclusive relationships. A CADFP Fellow mentioned being introduced to colleagues at the Host Fellows' institution. He kept these relationships in mind while collaborating with the Host Fellow. Even if there was a difference of opinion, it was important to be respectful and inclusive of these colleagues to build the academic network. Several Fellows mentioned specifically respecting their Host Fellow colleagues as African professionals and not discounting them or preferring their position coming from higher education institutions in the United States or Canada. This was important to create mutual trust and respect.

When it comes to maintaining a relationship with networks you have built in Africa – this is when you come in from America – we've got to be respectful of the people we work with because already there is this mentality – okay, I'm coming from America. I know that you guys don't know it. It doesn't work. I learned that I knew less, and I made sure that I was respectful of some people I worked with, which has helped maintain that relationship.

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Nigeria

Effective Communication

CADFP Fellows recognized ongoing communication as a basic need and a challenge in their CADFP experiences. It is essential to communicate with a clear goal and purpose and harness the momentum of the connection to collaborate. This was particularly hard due to the international nature of the

collaboration and the distance between CADFP Fellows' home and host institutions. Fellows in the focus group indicated that technology had aided them in maintaining their relationships with the Host Fellow once they left Africa. However, access to technology remained an issue in some locations with inadequate internet and computers or software. Communication was also further complicated by time zone differences, and maintaining this collaboration meant patience and time in continuing networks beyond the CADFP Fellowship. Many Fellows have put considerable time and energy into maintaining communication and have visited their Host Fellows or other networks in Africa to maintain this connection. Fewer, though some, have also hosted their African colleagues in the United States or Canada. Maintaining a successful connection also means prioritizing the time to meet in person and virtually.

Communication is the bedrock of sustaining networks in Africa.

– CADFP Alumnus, public university in Kenya

Shared Values

CADFP Fellows shared in the focus groups that being from Africa originally has made them very attune to their fellowship locations' values and cultural context. Whether CADFP Fellows were returning to countries where they had come from or were visiting new areas, their ability to understand the local cultural contexts allowed them to share an identity with others in their Host Fellow. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage since some CADFP Fellows discussed the difficulty of their role as outsiders and insiders at the same time. They had to navigate relationships, articulate their values, and learn about those of others to come to a deeper network connection. A CADFP Fellow was staying with a host colleague during the fellowship and encountered regular power cuts. The host colleague would use fuel, which was inordinately expensive during the time, to keep the electricity going. The CADFP Fellow knew that this gesture was only done for their ease and communicated to the host colleague that it was unnecessary. This insider and outsider knowledge aided in deeper trust and connection.

An interesting finding from one of the focus groups, which only included CADFP female alumnae, was the mentorship these alumnae provided to other African diaspora female academics to apply to the CADFP fellowship. These CADFP Fellows used their connections to share information about CADFP and mentored others through the application process. This mentorship, and the shared value of female empowerment in the African diaspora academia, opened the CADFP alumni network and subsequent groups of African female academics. This mentorship experience has continued, and those CADFP Fellows that were mentored are now mentoring other prospective fellows through the application process.

Maintaining a relationship involves a lot of sacrifices, both physical, material, knowledge, and spiritual – whatever that might mean – in forming that relationship and maintaining it.

– CADFP Alumna, public university in Nigeria



Conclusion

The CADFP model lends itself well to building sustainable international networks and creating academic collaborators. While CADFP Fellows come to their program experience with strong, existing networks, they can further strengthen and build new networks due to the CADFP experience. Fellows and Host Fellows further their networks by collaborating with their colleagues and students and leveraging their

connections to increase their and their Host Fellows' reputations. The success of these networks is built on tenets of respect, shared values, and effective communication, which proper the sustainability of these academic collaborations between higher education institutions in Africa and North America.