

The University of Michigan Provost Visits South Africa to Promote Partnerships

The Provost of the University of Michigan, Martin Philbert, visited South Africa in August 2018 as part of his Africa trip that included visits to Ghana and Ethiopia. Provost Philbert's trip reinforces the University of Michigan's investment in developing research collaborations in Africa, and follows up on a decade of engagement since President Emerita Mary Sue Coleman's trip to Africa. Although partnerships with Africa were formalized in 2008 with the establishment of the African Studies Center—as the center responsible for all engagements with Africa—the University of Michigan's engagement in the continent goes back nearly a century to 1928 when the first dissertation was written that dealt explicitly with Africa.

Provosts Philbert's visit a decade after continuous engagements with the University of Michigan's partners in Africa provides an opportunity to learn about the various partnerships both at the individual and institutional level and interact with peers and alumni of the University of Michigan African Presidential Scholars (UMAPS) fellowship program. "The Provost's visit was to also reaffirm University of Michigan's commitment to our existing relationships and to explore new opportunities for engaging with our African partners. Having a senior member of the University of Michigan visiting our African partners signals the recognition of the value-add by these partnerships in dealing with issues of global importance, as well as the importance of engaging face-to-face as equals" said Dr. Andries Coetzee, Professor of Linguistics and Director of the African Studies Center, University of Michigan.

Commenting on the relevance of the Provost's visit, Professor Raymond Silverman from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) said "It, therefore, has been extremely important for Provost Philbert to experience first-hand the outcomes of this work, and engage in conversations with our partners in Africa—specifically in Ghana, Ethiopia, and South Africa—about how we might build upon this work that will advance the collaborative research opportunities for scholars and scientists both at U-M and in Africa."

Such collaborations have led to the establishment of the University of Michigan African Presidential Scholars (UMAPS) Program that attracts early career faculty from African universities to Ann Arbor, MI for a period lasting up to six months. Since 2009, the UMAPS Program has welcomed 149 emerging African scholars from Ghana, South Africa, Liberia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Gabon, Nigeria, and Zambia, representing a wide range of disciplines working closely with the University of Michigan faculty.

With funding from the Andrew Mellon Foundation and internal University of Michigan funds, the African Studies Center has regularly organized conferences alternating between the US and the continent. The STEM Conference held in Cameroon in 2017 attracted over 400 participants from across the continent and the US. Dr. Florusbosch, Program Coordinator at the African Studies Center, believes that "Such conferences provide an opportunity for reenergizing existing partnerships and help to branch out and broaden the basis of our engagement. They also assist with the establishment of long-term engagement with new partners, including in different countries than where the main partnerships have been." Champions that are committed are needed to drive the partnerships. "You need individuals who are committed to the collaboration, but at the same time, you need the institutional support for continuity. The collaboration with our African partners should not be built on one individual but should be deep and wide" said Dr. Coetzee.

Provost Philbert was satisfied with the deep collaborations between the University of Michigan and Africa noting, "I'm deeply impressed by the work our faculty and students are doing with their partners on the African continent to build human capacity and to develop new ideas that address the most pressing concerns of their host nations".

Dr. Coetzee is optimistic that the Provost's visit to the African partners will foster continued collaboration at the individual and institutional level by working on policy documents to facilitate new opportunities and joint funding of projects. It is envisaged that the engagement during the visits will culminate in expanding long-term collaboration and in engaging more deeply with both student and UMAPS alumni.

- Michael Conteh

Link to Additional Resources

<https://record.umich.edu/articles/provosts-trip-africa-highlights-deep-collaborations>