

Teaching Mathematics at an African University—My Experience

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Abstract

After taking early retirement from one of the State University of New York colleges, I taught for nine years at the University of the Gambia, in the Republic of the Gambia, West Africa. In this paper, I will discuss my experiences there and talk about how other faculty members can help build the educational system of a developing country.

The University of the Gambia was founded in 1999. Until then, there had been no university in the small West African country. Students who wished to get a university degree typically went to Sierra Leone to study, since that was the nearest country that also had an English-language educational system. (There were programs in the Gambia to train teachers for elementary school and junior high school positions, but even to become a certified high school teacher one had to travel to another country.) When the civil wars broke out both in Sierra Leone and Liberia, studying in both of those countries became impossible and the other English-speaking countries in West Africa were too far away to be reasonable choices for most potential students. At that point, a Canadian university helped the country start its own university and many of the first courses were taught by faculty members from Canadian schools. The university tried to recruit long-term faculty from overseas, but offered such low salaries (even by African standards) that very few qualified people came. So the lower-level courses were mostly taught by minimally qualified Gambians and the upper-level courses were only taught when a visiting faculty member from another country came for a semester or a year. Students might have to wait several years for some of the courses they needed to take.

I first taught at the University of the Gambia at a visiting lecturer in 2008-09, on leave from my university in the United States. Since I had taught several of the upper-level courses that students were waiting to take, I was very warmly welcomed by both the students and the faculty. I was paid the standard salary for my rank, but was given free housing in a university-owned house. After that first year, I went back to the United States, retired from my job there and returned to Gambia in 2010. At this point, I was a regular, rather than visiting, faculty member and fairly quickly became de facto head of mathematics. (Officially, mathematics was part of the division of science, which had a single head, but he was very willing to leave all of the mathematics business to me.)

1 The successes

I was able to introduce several new courses to the curriculum. Since I taught most of the more advanced courses, using American textbooks and an American syllabus, my best students were prepared for graduate study in Europe or North America. Several of my students have already

earned Master's degrees and have returned to the university to teach. Several more are now in graduate programs.

2 The failures

I was unable to improve the dire working conditions of my staff, since the administration was not cooperative. So several of my best young colleagues left the university and got jobs elsewhere in the Gambia. Others went overseas for graduate study and will probably never return. Several of my brightest former students who got jobs with the university after they graduated were then forced by the university to enroll in bad graduate programs where they earned master's degrees without learning what they should have. Other good students are still trying unsuccessfully to gain admission to graduate schools in Europe or North America, since many schools don't take degrees from African universities seriously.

3 What can educators do to help at places like the University of the Gambia?

1. Go long-term to teach.

Unless you do this as a second career, as I did, you would probably need to go under the auspices of a missions agency and raise funds to supplement your university salary. If you do this, you need to be careful that the agency doesn't demand so much of your time and energy that you can't do a good job with your classes. There were Christian faculty at the University of the Gambia who saw teaching at the university merely as a visa platform or a way to pay for their "real work" as missionaries, and they hurt the reputation of Christianity on campus. (Gambia is a 95% Muslim country, so most of my colleagues were Muslims.) The workload is quite heavy, so you are unlikely to have very much time to do research. If you plan to eventually return to an academic job in the U.S., you need to think about that issue.

2. Go for a semester or a year.

Four visiting faculty members from the United States and the Netherlands came to teach mathematics for a semester or a year while I was in Gambia. Some came as a sabbatical from their regular university jobs and some came as part of an exchange program between their universities and the University of the Gambia. (Exchange programs typically sent a group of students and one supervising faculty member, who might be in any department. We were fortunate to have two of them in our area.) Each of them taught somewhere between two and four courses during the semester. When I knew in advance who was coming, I tried to assign an upper-level elective in that person's field as one of their courses. This allowed me to offer courses I normally could not have offered. It also meant that the math majors had exposure to another teaching style, since they otherwise had most of their upper-level courses with me. Several of these instructors also agreed to write letters of recommendation for graduate school for the good students in their classes. This was especially useful because a letter from an American professor carries much more weight than a letter from an African instructor.

3. Send books to a faculty member that you know in a developing country.

My students couldn't afford to buy books and the university library had very little. One of my friends in the US went to her colleagues and got donations of old-edition desk copies when new editions appeared. So I had a small lending library for my students. I do not recommend sending books to a university without directing them to an individual teacher. If you do that, the books may just end up being dumped into a storeroom somewhere.

4. If you teach at a university with a graduate program in math, encourage your graduate committee to consider applicants from developing countries seriously.

In many cases, these students are dismissed without serious consideration because their undergraduate institution is an unknown quantity.

4 Conclusion

There are plenty of opportunities for first-world faculty members to help universities in developing countries. The students in those countries are just as smart as our students, and just as deserving of getting a good education. As Christians, we serve the God of the entire world and should be even more motivated than our non-Christian colleagues to reach out to them. I hope that you will pray and consider how you or your college can help.