Liberia turns to AASCU for help in rebuilding their higher education system

By Cheryl Fields

In a visible demonstration of AASCU members’ increasing commitment to international education and engagement, a team of AASCU leaders recently returned from a visit to Liberia, where they assessed the West African nation’s challenges as it tries to reconstruct a functioning higher education system and plan for the future after 14 years of civil war.

The details of future cooperative agreements and programs have yet to be decided. Participants said they viewed the mission as an opportunity not only to help Liberia, but also for their own campuses to gain opportunities for their faculty and students to become more internationally aware and globally competent. Further, they said, they were heartened at the importance being given to the role of education in helping that nation get back on its feet.

“It is true that there are enormous needs,” said George Mehaffy, vice president for academic leadership and change at AASCU, but “we were all struck by the amazing optimism and hope for the future expressed by Liberians.” The government officials AASCU leaders met with before and during the weeklong trip to Liberia are committed to using education to achieve economic stability and produce a new civil society, Mehaffy said.

“You can hear the optimism when you talk with the President of Liberia,” added team member Elizabeth Davis-Russell, provost at State University of New York at Cortland and herself a native Liberian. The nation’s President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, “has helped to give a sense of hope to the country through her emphasis on education and eradicating corruption,” said Davis-Russell.

Liberia, a nation of three million people that was founded in the 19th century by freed American slaves, was consumed by civil wars and invasions beginning in 1989. The civil war ended in 2003, and Sirleaf was elected President in late 2005. A Harvard-trained economist and Africa’s first elected female head of state, she has held economic positions at the World Bank and the United Nations. Sirleaf recently has announced debt relief and promises of foreign aid from several nations, including the United States.
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Sirleaf’s Minister of Education, Joseph Korto, approached AASCU last year when he was looking for assistance in formulating a plan to reconstruct Liberia’s postsecondary sector. Korto was familiar with the association due to a World Bank project AASCU was involved in the 1980’s when he was completing his Ph.D. at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

AASCU leaders met in Washington and New York with Korto, Sirleaf, various donor groups and Liberian expatriates and put out a call to member campuses to gauge interest in a project to help Liberia plan for a higher education structure that would help deal with its huge educational challenges. These include high unemployment and illiteracy, the need for both advanced education and job training, and ways to reintegrate into society former combatants in the civil war, including child soldiers who have had no education.

The team that was eventually put together was made up of Mehaffy and Arlene Jackson, AASCU’s Director of International Education, and five provosts or vice chancellors of member campuses. (See sidebar.) Members offered diverse expertise and interests, noted one participant, Wilhelmina Reuben-Cooke, provost of the University of the District of Columbia.

Besides experience in institutional change on U.S. campuses, some members had experience with Liberia itself, with Liberian colleges, or with expatriate Liberian academics and other professionals. Others had expertise in distance education or with institutional models that combine traditional baccalaureate and master’s-level education with programs providing associate degrees, adult education and job training.

Since team members’ return in late April, they have been working on a list of ways in which the association and its members could help Liberian education officials work toward their goals of access, quality, and an effective governance system for postsecondary education. The Liberian officials will select what options they want to make priorities and then AASCU will flesh out the possible initiatives, indicate a timeline and possible partners, and help determine where sources of funding might be available.

Liberian educational officials recognize that comprehensive, credible plans are needed to attract the kind of support from foreign governments, charitable foundations, and other non-governmental organizations that Liberia will need to move forward, team members indicated.

Prior to the war, the nation’s postsecondary institutions included the University of Liberia, with three campuses around the capital, Monrovia, and smaller church-related institutions such as Cuttington College and AME Zion University. There were also a handful of technical colleges and public teacher-training institutes. Although classes are being held, not only has the physical infrastructure of Liberian postsecondary education been devastated—with buildings burned, laboratories stripped, and equipment stolen—but the country’s road network has been destroyed and there is no functioning national electricity grid or water system.

Thus education officials are faced with such long-term questions as whether to pursue a
centralized or decentralized public higher education system and how to manage reform and ensure quality, while at the same time needing shorter-term solutions for pressing problems.

To carry out Liberian education officials’ goal of expanding access to postsecondary education, the government would like to create three new institutions in parts of the country distant from Monrovia. Mehaffy said that team members suggested perhaps creating community colleges to meet current needs for workforce development and that these institutions might morph eventually into four-year institutions—just as several states in the U.S. have allowed the establishment of some baccalaureate-level programs at existing community colleges.

AASCU might help Liberian officials weigh such options through coordinating visits by Liberian officials to see examples of two-year and four-year sites that share facilities and programs. It also could send a design team to Liberia that would offer expertise in community college and university strategic planning, as well as facilities planning and development of distance education, Mehaffy noted.

Team members noted that cell phones are in use in Liberia and that Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television, was visiting Monrovia with an African-American investment group while they were there, indicating that the nation might gain access to funding for communications needs through such contacts.

Another overarching goal for Liberian education officials is to find ways to provide quality—in faculty, curriculum, and infrastructure—despite the limited resources. An immediate need is producing “a cadre of well-trained individuals and attracting back others who have left” to teach university classes, noted Reuben-Cooke of the University of the District of Columbia. Many academics with advanced degrees either were killed during the war years or have fled the country.

In one department at the University of Liberia, noted Mehaffy, there were nearly 30 Ph.D.’s and 24 master’s-trained faculty before the civil war started, with baccalaureate-level faculty used only as laboratory and teaching assistants. After the war, the unit had only two Ph.D.’s and four master’s-qualified faculty members left, so many faculty teaching courses at all levels have only bachelor’s degrees.

“There was a tremendous brain drain and that needs to be reversed,” agreed Kenoye Eke, provost and vice president of academic affairs at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. “There is no doubt that the country needs a mix of institutions to serve the people and to help harness the resources of the country.” He noted that he is married to a Liberian and thus has met many expatriates, some of whom have started returning to the country. “It is very clear their society needs a lot of retraining programs to help the displaced returning home find a way to integrate back into society in a useful way.”

Training teachers for the nation’s primary and secondary schools is another daunting challenge. Only about half of the school-age population is now enrolled, according to Liberian officials, and many elementary schools have been destroyed or damaged. Funds are limited for establishing secondary schools in many locations. Further, 65 percent of the teachers now in classrooms lack content knowledge of the subjects they are teaching and have had no training to be teachers. Many of them stepped in when trained teachers fled the country during the civil war.

Noted Davis-Russell of State University of New York at Cortland, “In our conversations with Liberian officials, we tried to stress that the higher education system cannot be looked at in isolation and that officials need to be thinking of the primary and secondary system at the same time.”

AASCU might help with the overall need for more trained human capital by asking campuses to provide year-long scholarships for Liberian faculty to come to the United States to complete degree programs or acquire pedagogical training or advanced disciplinary study. Outside support would be needed for housing and living expenses, Meahffy noted.
To provide training in Liberia, he said team members discussed development of a National Faculty Development Center in Monrovia that would be managed by the Ministry of Education. It could provide facilities for visiting scholars from the United States to run professional development programs for faculty at approved Liberian institutions. Liberian faculty might also use the facilities to enroll in distance education courses offered by institutions around the world. A variety of donors, including computer and Internet companies, would be needed to support this initiative.

AASCU also might help by organizing drives to collect textbooks and laboratory equipment to fill the immediate needs for replacing destroyed or outdated curricular materials.

The Liberian government also is concerned about developing appropriate governance mechanisms for postsecondary institutions, particularly because officials say some questionable for-profit institutions are springing up that provide education of dubious quality. AASCU might send a team of experts to Liberia to help develop a workable accreditation process. Or it could arrange visits by Liberian officials to accreditation agencies in the United States and set up discussions with American university presidents, system heads, and state officials involved in the accreditation process here.

Besides offering strategic help to a struggling nation like Liberia, it is important for AASCU campuses to recognize the benefits they can accrue from involvement in such projects. …

I see the utility of our involvement as helping our students become more aware of a world they can’t even imagine.”

—George Mehaffy

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