Researchers at the University of Virginia (UVA) have created a new educational consortium, the Southern African Virginia Networks and Associations (SAVANA). SAVANA was envisioned as a framework among partner institutions in the U.S. and southern Africa, designed to facilitate research, education and outreach activities related to the environment. All SAVANA initiatives require each institutional partner to be involved from the outset, ensuring that financial and intellectual benefits accrue both to U.S. and to African partners.

SAVANA has arranged a variety of activities based on the three major principles of the consortium: relationship, respect and reciprocity. These activities have included distance-learning, Summer Study Abroad courses, January Term Intensive preparatory courses, semester exchanges, graduate level fellowships, and year abroad teaching fellowships. Students from the U.S. and Africa are involved jointly in interdisciplinary projects within local communities and workplaces and share travel and living experiences.

The scientific foci of SAVANA include regional responses to global environmental change and sustainability, systematic responses to environmental change at the state level and the translation of scientific research to policy. The inter-disciplinary activities of the SAVANA consortium have expanded to incorporate human systems, livelihoods and community health to better understand regional environments.

A cornerstone consortium activity at UVA is hosting students and faculty from partnering institutions. Graduate students and faculty from our partnering institutions have been hosted in “sandwich programs” in which students remain registered at their home institutions but spend up to 18 months at UVA. Likewise, southern African institutions have hosted U.S. students and faculty at their campuses.

Other formal components of the academic program have included a month-long study abroad course called “People, Culture, and the Environment of Southern Africa.” This course was developed as an intensive introduction to the complexity of human-environmental interaction in southern Africa. The course takes approximately 15 U.S. and 5 regional students through urban and rural engagements within the Limpopo River catchment from its headwaters (Johannesburg) to the sea (Mozambique).

Central to the success of the program, and consistent with the SAVANA philosophy, is the involvement of southern African lecturers and students in the course as full-time participants. Living and travelling together provides U.S. and African students with an intensive learning experience beyond what is possible in formal learning settings. The course has been offered for six years, with over 80 U.S. and 20 southern African student participants.

At UVA, an intersession January-term course entitled “Ethics, Protocols, and Practices of International Research” has also been developed to prepare students for international research experience. Over the past three years, 55 U.S. students and 18 southern African colleagues have participated in this course.

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