

African-United States University Collaborations: Experiences, Current Dynamics, and Readiness for Effective Research

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Abstract

Employing Collaboration Theory, which involves the investigation of the process of people working together to achieve a common goal, often focusing on how they organize work and build group cohesion, this paper explores how African and United States universities can collaborate to engage in effective research initiatives. Thus, using descriptive qualitative methodology, the paper relates the thesis that research partnerships between universities in Africa and the United States can serve as a critical platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and addressing global challenges. This paper dissects the dynamics, insights, and evolving trends shaping these partnerships, with a focus on preparedness for impactful and equitable research collaborations.

Keywords: University Collaborations, Collaboration Theory, Descriptive Qualitative Methodology, Effective Research

Introduction

According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), African-United States university collaborations involve partnerships to strengthen higher education, research, and student/faculty exchanges, supported by government initiatives, foundations, and organizations like the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). These partnerships focus on areas like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), public health, and institutional development, and include joint degrees, faculty exchanges, and joint research projects. Examples of these initiatives include the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA), the United States-South Africa Higher Education Network, and the Academic Model Providing Access to Healthcare (AMPATH) collaboration (APLU, 2025).

With a focus on the research aspect of African-United States university collaborations, the purpose of this paper is to examine how African and United States universities can collaborate to engage in effective research initiatives. The objective is to identify what the universities, especially in Africa, need to do to be ready for the collaborations. The research question is therefore quite straightforward: What do the universities, especially those in Africa, need to do to be ready for research collaborations? The attendant hypothesis is the following:

Research partnerships between universities in Africa and the United States can serve as a critical platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and addressing global challenges.

Accordingly, this paper addresses the following four major issues (1) the need for African-United States university collaborations and areas of priority, (2) the current dynamics driving African-United States university collaborations, (3) the harmonization of interests for effective and mutually beneficial collaborations, and (4) what universities, especially those in Africa, need to do to be ready for the research collaborations. In order to ground the investigation of these issues the Collaboration Theory and the descriptive qualitative methodological technique are utilized. The next two sections describe these approaches one at a time for the sake of clarity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework upon which this essay is partly grounded is based on the Collaboration Theory, defined earlier as the investigation of the process of people working together to achieve a common goal, often focusing on how they organize work and build group cohesion. And, according to the Center for Open Science (2025), the theory is a conglomeration of a variety of analytical frameworks employed to comprehend the processes and results of individuals or organizations working together toward a common goal. Indeed, there is no single, universally accepted theory, but rather a collection of approaches developed across different academic fields that include Business, Education, Health Care, and Psychology.

Five major principles have been noted to underlie the theory. First, *effective communication* is said to be foundational for all collaborative efforts, thereby enabling the exchange of ideas and feedback. Second, *shared responsibility* calls for team members to take mutual accountability for both their own work and the success of the group. Third, *active engagement* requires individuals to participate in discussions and activities in order to deepen their understanding and contribute to the collective effort. Fourth, *diverse perspectives* generate benefits from bringing together individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives to challenge assumptions and broaden understanding. And fifth, *trust and respect* are pivotal for open communication and willingness to be influenced by others (for more on this, see Meta Collab, 2025).

The preceding five principles, as Meta Collab points out, allow researchers using Collaboration Theory to comprehend “the collaborative process and its outcomes derived through various forms of research and reflection” (2025, 1) Meta Collab also clarifies that “Although there is currently no widely accepted general theory of collaboration, there are many theoretical approaches to collaborative practice that have been developed within a wide variety of disciplines” (2025, 1).

The theory has been applied in several areas. One area is “collaborative learning,” whereby in the field of Education, students work together to solve problems and share knowledge, leading to deeper understanding and improved social skills. Another area is “organizational development,” whereby in the field of Business Management, the theory is utilized to improve team dynamics, foster innovation, and enhance performance. The other area is “research,” whereby researchers use the theory to analyze the behaviors within a group and better comprehend the dynamics of collaboration itself (for more on this, see Event Solutions, 2025).

Also, as Event Solutions indicates, the application of Collaboration Theory has been quite

effective when the “three C’s of team building” are emphasized. These three C’s are “Communication, Collaboration, and Coordination,” which are skills that “tie into one another in some form or fashion, one leading into another as they go” (Even Solutions, 2025, 1). Even Solutions goes on to define these skills as follows: “Communication is the base of them all, and forms the foundation for a well-functioning team. Collaboration comes from good communication as your team communicates to work towards a common goal. Coordination is working together effectively, and comes into play once your team has bonded through collaborative efforts” (2025, 1)..

Research Methodology

The research methodology that is also partially utilized to ground the essay hinges upon the qualitative descriptive approach. With an emphasis on words (i.e. *qualitative*), as opposed to an emphasis on numerical values (i.e. *quantitative*), the approach allows researchers to illustrate facts by focusing on a single or specific nature of a phenomenon (Bangura et al., 2019).

According to Abdul Karim Bangura, Joy A. Obando, Ishmael I. Munene and Chris Shisanya (2019), the qualitative descriptive approach is one that is focused on detailed propositions and questions about a phenomenon that is carefully scrutinized and articulated at the outset. They also point out that the approach is a means to provide tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts. When the approach is applied correctly, they add, it becomes a valuable method for developing a theory, evaluating programs, and developing interventions (Bangura et al., 2019).

Furthermore, as Bangura et al. explain, the main goal of the approach is to assess a phenomenon in detail based on an articulation of a given theory (such as the Collaboration Theory in this essay). As such, a user of the approach must respect the depth and scope of the phenomenon under study, which is conveyed through robust propositions and probing the “What is?” type question. Bangura and his colleagues also caution that if the approach cannot be employed easily for the investigation of a phenomenon, then a researcher may want to consider whether that phenomenon is more of an exploratory or explanatory nature. Thus, they posit that the approach should be used more prudently to reveal patterns and connections, in relation to theoretical constructs, in order to advance theory development. This is one reason, they say, some researchers characterize the approach as one that is “intensive or focused” and “helpful...for directing the researcher’s desired level of intellectual penetration of a phenomenon” (Bangura et al., 2019, 64).

In light of the preceding discussion of the approach, an immediate and logical question that arises here is the following: How has the approach been applied to study real-world phenomena? Bangura et al. provide the following answer:

[The approach has been] applied in studies that are primarily concerned with finding out ‘what is’ and the ‘role of’ in qualitative studies such as observational (behavioral) studies. Some medical scientists use this approach to illustrate the development, the particularity, and the evolution of certain diseases in relation to others. It helps to specify the boundaries of a phenomenon, and it contributes significantly to the rigor of a finished study. The power and promise of the approach lie in its potential for mining for abstract interpretations of data and

theory development (2019, 64-65).

Given the preceding, it is quite obvious that the qualitative descriptive approach is tenable for the phenomenon under investigation in this paper.

The Need for African-United States University Collaborations and Areas of Priority

While there are many issue areas that cry for African-United States university research collaborations, five stand out the most as needing priority. They are (1) globalization; (2) United States-China competition for global dominance; (3) neocolonialism and the need for deneocoloniality; (4) the need for a peaceful world; and (5) the imperative for indigenous knowledge maintenance, development, and promotion. I examine these issue areas one at a time in the ensuing subsections for the sake of perspicuity.

Globalization

Globalization is very well studied and defined phenomenon. According to Kelebogile T. Setiloane and Abdul Karim Bangura (2020), for example, it is the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, driven by cross-border trade, technology, and the flow of information and investment. It involves the integration of national markets and societies through trade, communication, and cultural exchange, leading to both opportunities like economic growth and potential challenges like environmental impact.

Nonetheless, as Setiloane and Bangura (2020) also point out, there are some serious shortcomings of globalization. These include job displacement due to outsourcing, increased economic inequality, cultural homogenization, and environmental degradation from industrial activity and transportation. The authors add that globalization also heightens vulnerability to global economic downturns and the spread of diseases and can lead to the exploitation of labor in some regions such as Africa.

United States-China Competition for Global Dominance

One gleans from the article by James Van de Velde (2024) that the competition between the United States and China for global dominance is a multifaceted struggle across economic, technological, and military spheres, characterized by both direct competition and strategic interdependence. The major areas of competition, according to the author, include a race for technological supremacy, particularly in advanced industries, and a geoeconomic rivalry over trade and global influence, especially in developing nations. The author adds that the competition is framed by the United States as a “great power competition” that involves “invest, align, compete” and cooperation on shared interests, while China also engages in diplomatic, military, and informational competition.

Specifically, Van de Velde indicates that “The last two (Donald Trump and Joe Biden) United States national security strategies have claimed that the United States is in ‘strategic competition’ (a.k.a., ‘Great Power Competition’) with the autocracies of Russia and the People’s Republic of China” (2024, 1). The author goes on to add that “the most important challenge facing the United States in the twenty-first century is the rise of the powerful and increasingly

authoritarian—if not totalitarian—states of China and Russia” (Van de Velde, 2024, 1).

Neocolonialism and the Need for Deneocoloniality

Tracing the coining of the notion of *neocolonialism* to Jean Paul Satre and its popularization to Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, Abdul Karim Bangura (2025) denotes it as the practice of using economic, political and cultural pressures to control or influence other countries, particularly former colonies such as those in Africa, without direct formal political or military intervention. According to Bangura, neocolonialism is a modern form of imperialism whereby a powerful country indirectly maintains or extends its dominance over nominally independent states, with the collaboration of the leaders and other local elites of those states maintaining and even enhancing oppressive systems for their own self-interests.

Hence, unlike proponents of “decoloniality” who advocate eliminating “the residual impacts of colonialism by external forces” in order to deal with the aforementioned problem, Bangura calls for the use of “deneocoloniality” that would comprehensively deal with it by addressing the machinations of both external and internal actors (2025, 3). In essence, as Bangura puts it, “deneocoloniality expands on decoloniality and neocolonialism” and, thus, offers “a more comprehensive framework for understanding the current realities in African countries” (2025, 3).

The Need for a Peaceful World

Following the United Nations’ sustainable development “Goal 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies,” we need a peaceful world in order to promote economic prosperity, social development, and individual wellbeing, as it provides the stability needed for progress and reduces the costs of conflict. Without peace, asserts the organization, societies will face instability, violence, and a high economic toll, while peace fosters stronger economies, better health outcomes, and more opportunities for human potential to flourish. Achieving peace, adds the organization, requires both global efforts, such as those by the organization and individual actions like managing disputes peacefully, practicing tolerance, and managing personal stress (United Nations, 2025).

As the United Nations also points out, we should care about a peaceful world because “High levels of armed violence and insecurity have a destructive impact on a country’s development. Sexual violence, crime, exploitation and torture are prevalent where there is conflict or no rule of law” (2025, 1). Thus, the organization insists that “Governments, civil society and communities need to work together to find lasting solutions to conflict and insecurity. Strengthening the rule of law and promoting human rights is key to this process, as is reducing the flow of illicit arms, combating corruption, and ensuring inclusive participation at all times” (United Nations, 2025, 1).

The Imperative for Indigenous Knowledge Maintenance, Development, and Promotion

As Xholiso E Khazamula (2023) makes the case quite eloquently, the maintenance, development and promotion of indigenous knowledge is imperative for cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development. The author adds, this unique, intergenerational, and

place-based wisdom offers valuable insights and solutions to contemporary global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss that often complement, and sometimes surpass, modern scientific methods.

Also, according to Khazamula (2023), the strength of indigenous knowledge, which “refers to the unique and traditional knowledge systems, practices, and beliefs that have been developed and passed down through generations within specific indigenous communities, encompasses a wide range of knowledge, including ecological, agricultural, medicinal, spiritual, and cultural knowledge” (2023, 1). In addition, as the author points out, “This knowledge is deeply rooted in the land, environment, and cultural heritage of indigenous peoples, and is often considered to be holistic, interconnected, and sustainable in nature” (Khazamula, 2023, 1). Furthermore, as the author indicates, “Indigenous knowledge is not only valuable for the communities that possess it, but also for the wider world, as it offers alternative perspectives and solutions to contemporary challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and food security” (Khazamula, 2023, 1).

Current Dynamics Driving African-United States University Collaborations

Based on the article on current United States policy dealing with higher education alliances in Africa written by Desmond Thompson (2025), it can be gleaned that the dynamics driving African-United States university collaborations hinge upon a complex mix of shared global priorities, strategic shifts toward reciprocity, new funding dynamics, and increased competition from other global players. The author also points out that while traditional drivers like aid and capacity building remain, the focus has shifted toward more equitable and sustainable partnerships.

In addition, according to the United States Department of State (2025), there are five major drivers that underlie Africa-United States university research collaborations. First, the two regions have “shared global priorities.” These priorities include (a) “academic partnerships” that are increasingly focused on addressing pressing global challenges, thereby positioning Africa as a critical partner rather than just a recipient of aid; (b) “public health,” an area in which United States universities collaborate with the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) on disease surveillance, genome sequencing, and health workforce training; (c) “climate change and sustainability,” an area in which joint research focuses on climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy to address environmental challenges relevant to both regions; and (d) “food security,” whereby United States initiatives like Feed the Future have historically helped fund research to develop resilient crops and improve farming practices in partnership with African universities (United States Department of State, 2025).

Second, there is a “shift toward reciprocity and African leadership” Concerning this driver, there is a growing emphasis on more balanced and mutually beneficial partnerships, moving away from a donor-recipient model. This is evident in the following aspects: (a) an “African-led vision,” as initiatives are increasingly channeling investments toward coherent, African-led, long-term visions for higher education capacity; and (b) the “African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA),” an initiative involving 20 African universities working with international partners, including European universities and networks like Universitas 21, to enhance research and graduate training. This initiative strengthens intra-African collaboration and builds a critical mass of research capacity (United States Department of State, 2025).

Third, “technological advancements” are being made. Examples of this driver include (a) when the Coronavirus Disease (COVID)-2019 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning and digital tools which generated new avenues for collaboration; (b) “digital innovation” via United States-Africa initiatives now focusing on expanding digital access, promoting digital skills, and fostering a digital economy; and (c) “online learning” through the increased use of online programs that allows for greater flexibility and expansion of educational opportunities for a larger number of students across Africa (United States Department of State, 2025).

Fourth, “new and evolving dynamics” are taking place. Apropos this driver, the following are indicators: (a) “funding uncertainties and diversification,” whereby there is a shift in United States foreign policy that has led to instability and forced African universities to seek more diverse funding sources.; (b) “United States government policy shifts,” as reports in early 2025 indicated potential United States aid freezes targeting the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other initiatives due to their corrupt activities, threatening ongoing collaborations in public health, climate research, and academic exchanges; (c) the “rise of other players,” leading African institutions to increasingly diversify their partnerships and seeking funding from alternative sources such as the European Union (EU) and China, which offer different models of engagement; and (c) “private philanthropy,” whereby foundations like the Carnegie Corporation and Bloomberg Philanthropies have a history of investing in African higher education and continue to play a crucial role (United States Department of State, 2025).

And fifth, there is a “growing influence of the African Diaspora.” As it pertains to this driver, the following facets are discernible: (a) the United States recognizes the African Diaspora as a significant resource for promoting economic and academic engagement; (b) historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States explicitly foster partnerships with African universities; and (c) “diaspora engagement initiatives” such as the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program facilitate exchanges between scholars in the United States and Africa to build academic capacity and networks (United States Department of State, 2025).

Harmonization of Interests for Effective and Mutually Beneficial Collaborations

In order to *harmonize* (i.e. the quality of forming a pleasing and consistent whole, or being in agreement or concord) the interests of African and United States universities in the pursuit of effective and mutually beneficial research collaborations, I suggest a multifaceted strategy. The facets are nothing new; they are quite prevalent in scholarly literature, especially in the fields of Business Administration and Management and Public Policy.

To commence with, researchers at African and United States universities seeking to collaborate on projects must identify shared goals. This is crucial for improving teamwork and performance by generating alignment, fostering unity, and boosting motivation. This shared purpose clarifies priorities, strengthens bonds, and helps individuals see how their work contributes to a larger objective, making everyone more engaged and resilient when facing challenges.

Next, the researchers seeking to collaborate must understand individual needs. This is crucial for personal growth, improving relationships, and achieving success in professional settings. It allows for tailored care, more effective communication, and the ability to establish a balanced life by addressing both basic and complex emotional, social and psychological

requirements.

Also, the researchers must identify what they need to do to achieve their goals. This is crucial because it provides a clear direction, breaks down overwhelming objectives into manageable steps, and increases motivation and commitment. This process turns vague dreams into a concrete action plan, thereby allowing people to track progress, hold themselves accountable, and stay focused on their desired outcome.

In addition, the researchers must engage in active listening and open communication, and focus on building trust and transparency. This is crucial for building trust and transparency, which strengthens relationships, boosts morale, and improves problem-solving and innovation. Active listening shows respect and empathy, making people feel heard and valued, while transparent communication, which includes being honest about both successes and failures, fosters an environment where people feel safe to contribute and are more likely to be engaged.

Furthermore, the researchers must pursue an outcome based on promoting shared interests over individual positions, and collaborate by developing creative solutions that benefit all parties involved. This is crucial for strengthening relationships, improving results, and fostering a more stable and sustainable environment for all involved parties.

What Universities, Especially Those in Africa, Need to Do to Be Ready for the Research Collaborations

That there are numerous things universities, especially those in Africa, need to do to be ready for African-United States research collaborations is hardly a matter of dispute. Nonetheless, for the sake of relative brevity, I discuss seven of them in this section.

First, an African university should have a separate office for research and other grants. This is essential to manage grant funding, which will help the university to stay competitive and financially stable, and to provide crucial support to researchers in finding opportunities, prepare proposals, and handle the administrative and financial compliance of awards.

Second, an African university should eschew rigidity. This is necessary to address the continent and United States' complex, dynamic challenges, enhance researcher success, and ensure its own institutional relevance and sustainability in a rapidly changing world.

Third, an African university should promote flexibility. This is necessary to increase accessibility, support diverse researcher needs, and improve success rates. After all, flexibility allows researchers with family obligations, or varying abilities to pursue top-level research, while also enabling universities to adapt their teaching and research to solve regional problems and remain affordable amid economic pressures like fluctuating exchange rates.

Fourth, an African university researcher should eschew vacuous concepts. This is imperative to ensure that his/her research is relevant to local contexts, addresses specific societal challenges, and fosters self-reliance and sustainable development. Rejecting theories that are inconsistent with community knowledge systems and experiences is a major part of deneocolonizing knowledge and moving beyond Eurocentric dominance in academia.

Fifth, an African university researcher should promote theoretical and methodological grounding. This is important to guarantee ensure rigor, credibility, and relevance in addressing complex local challenges, as well as to contribute to a deneocolonized and locally informed global academic discourse.

Sixth, an African university should promote and reward publishing. This is needed to enhance the university and researchers' global and local impact, build a strong knowledge

economy, and contribute to national development. This calls for improving academic standing, increasing visibility, fostering local innovation, and ensuring that research is relevant to African challenges which, subsequently, can lead to better rankings, funding, and career opportunities for researchers.

And seventh, African universities should collaborate in developing their own archiving system. This is imperative for sharing costs, improving the visibility of local research, preserving their unique historical records, and developing African-centric archival frameworks. Collaboration can pool limited resources, avoid duplication of efforts, and address challenges like funding, technology, and a lack of local expertise in digitizing and preserving records. By working together, they can develop a system that better reflects African contexts and counters the dominance of Eurocentric archival practices.

Conclusion

By utilizing the Collaboration Theory and the qualitative descriptive method to examine how African and United States universities can significantly benefit from effective research collaborations, the preceding sections reveal that there is great potential for these universities to be quite effective if they are guided by some key factors. These factors include identifying the need for African-United States university collaborations and areas of priority, the current dynamics driving African-United States university collaborations, the harmonization of interests for effective and mutually beneficial collaborations, and what universities, especially those in Africa, need to do to be ready for the research collaborations.

The overall essentiality of the analysis therefore hinges upon two major aspects. One aspect is the essence of Collaboration Theory, which is couched in the postulate that individuals working together with shared goals can achieve greater outcomes than they could individually, often by combining diverse perspectives and strengths. The major principles of this postulate, as demonstrated in the preceding sections, include shared responsibility, active communication, mutual respect and trust, and a focus on “essence” (i.e. shared values and goals) before “form” (i.e. the practical details). In short, Collaboration Theory allowed me to explore how African and United States researchers can harness their collective power to solve complex problems and foster learning and innovation.

The other aspect is the essence of the qualitative descriptive method, which is predicated on the premise that in order to provide a straightforward, factual summary of a phenomenon based on participants’ own words, focus must be placed on the “who, what, and where” of their experiences. In essence, the method is a grounded approach that aims to stay close to the data to provide a detailed and easily understandable depiction, making it a useful starting point for exploring new topics.

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