Establishing Roots, Extending Branches:
A Partnership from the Coast of Tanzania to Tiny Rural New Hampshire to Cosmopolitan San Francisco

By Regnier A. Jurado, Georgina Lopez, Nana Mgimwa, and Jill Mortali
The Baobab tree dominates the landscape of Tanzania and is a source of food, water, and health remedies. Like the Baobab tree, research administration at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) in Dar es Salaam (DAR) has been working to deepen “roots” and grow “branches” of services to researchers. MUHAS has established a collaboration stretching across the globe from the coast of Tanzania to the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) to Dartmouth College. Since 2013, MUHAS has worked with Dartmouth and UCSF to strengthen its Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP) to support HIV research through two NIH Fogarty grants. MUHAS is now leveraging the knowledge gained through the partnership to branch out to share knowledge across Tanzania by developing partnerships with five other Tanzania institutions.

By 2008, researchers from the institutions had been collaborating for decades. HIV is estimated to affect 1.4 million people in Tanzania or 5.1% of the population, and had been a priority for the three institutions, resulting in 26 collaborative projects at MUHAS. While they were obtaining good research results, MUHAS faculty had to fend for themselves in preparing proposals, managing awards, and navigating the complexities of regulations. The researchers recognized that advancements at MUHAS could be facilitated by developing institutional capacity and a skilled research administration team in DAR.

In 2010/11, MUHAS and UCSF, with funding from the Gates Foundation and NIH, conducted a stakeholders’ survey of problems affecting research projects. The survey revealed considerable need and demand for capacity building in pre- and post-award grants management, ranging from support in preparing proposal packages to streamlining budgeting and procurement. As a result, Nana Mgmw a was hired in 2010 as the sole member of the newly formed sponsored projects office. As Nana explains “My career in MUHAS began in April 2010. I was employed as grants and contracts officer for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded Academic Learning Project (ALP). MUHAS was working in collaboration with UCSF. During my recruitment interview one of the Principal Investigators for ALP, Prof. Sarah Macfarlane, said something I always remember: ‘we are not expecting someone who knows everything about managing grants, but someone who can be trained and develop in the field.’ I thought, this is where I want to be; the place I can be molded to suit the purpose.”

In the early days of the office, Nana was able to achieve significant progress including implementing standard operating procedures to guide the office, establishing functions to manage pre- and post-award including project accounts, procurement, and supplies management.

To further grow the operation, the partnering institutions applied to the NIH Fogarty Center’s Global Infections Disease Research Administration Development Award for Low-and Middle-Income Country Institutions (G11). The award, received in April 2013, was a turning point that mobilized resources to develop capacity at MUHAS, including support for the development of training materials and conference travel. During the past four years, this global collaboration has resulted in faculty and administrators from institutions and research projects in the US and in Tanzania receiving training sessions in research administration to support research administration in their respective institutions.

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Senior faculty researchers from each institution along with experienced research administrators have been actively engaged in the collaboration. Monthly conference calls have been consistently held over the past three years. During these calls, MUHAS provides updates on the developing infrastructure and identifies training needs. Each of the institutions contribute ideas and track key milestones and achievements and plan next steps.

The collaboration has strengthened research infrastructure at MUHAS through training strategies and providing direct support to establish capacity: focused training of three research administrators to become trainers of trainers; online mentorship from Dartmouth and UCSF; and onsite workshops and video-conferences. In addition, two multi-day workshops have been held in Tanzania. MUHAS administrators have visited Dartmouth and attended and presented at the professional meetings of the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) and other US and international professional groups. Direct support at MUHAS has included assistance to reorganize the OSP and recruitment of additional staff.

Research administration capacity at MUHAS has developed beyond OSP. The OSP organization at MUHAS is part of the Directorate of Research and Publications (DRP), an office comprised of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP), Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), and Research Development (RD).

Developing research policies and guidelines has been key to furthering capacity, including: Research Policy and Guidelines, Institutional Repository Policy, Conflict of Interest, Time and Effort Compensation, Institutional Overhead Facilities and Administrative Costs, and Professorial Research Chairs Policy.

Asking Nana about her biggest challenges, she indicates change management and establishing trust. “Centralized research administration was a new thing in MUHAS. It was not easy to get people who know a lot of things change to having other people help. I needed to create that trust from researchers that I can be of help and not taking total control of their science.”

When did Nana and others know that the office had succeeded in establishing trust? She says “Processing, submitting a successful grant proposal! This means that there is a working system in our institution. Researchers are coming for advice in administrative matters of research. Having a contract signed and seeing projects run successfully to close out is a major achievement. Working with other administrators, accountants...
and procurement officers towards a common goal has helped in pushing research administration at MUHAS forward. MUHAS is now becoming a center of learning for other institutions in Tanzania. Our ability to establish this system with limited resources is remarkable.”

“It was great teamwork…”

Among the many ways that the office now supports researchers: distributing funding opportunity announcements; internal training and mentoring; and regular meetings with researchers. A significant milestone was the recent submission by MUHAS of an NIH grant application for D43: Patient Centered Outcome Research (PCOR) grant proposal to NIH.

In addition to successful proposal submissions, the MUHAS research administrative team (now expanded to include a procurement officer and an accountant) has planned, coordinated, and held a three-day workshop. This workshop “What Reviewers Want: Research Training in Writing Successful Grant Application” included a training from both MUHAS faculty and research administrators. Participants came from across Tanzania to improve their research skills and learn from MUHAS.

In discussing the partnership, Nana focused on a few highlights: “Meeting the collaborating institutions’ team of research administrators and developing a training program that works in our setting. Presenting at NCURA and SRA. It was great being able to share challenges and achievements of north-south collaboration and understanding that this can be a module for other institutions. We jointly successfully submitted the G11 grant application. It was great team work.”

In summary, the efforts of MUHAS, the UCSF and Dartmouth partners, and the NIH funding has resulted in establishing a strong foundation/roots at MUHAS. The recent effort to extend the branches to other Tanzania institutions is further evidence of the success of the partnership. As Nana said, “The major achievement so far is with limited resources, establishing MUHAS OSP as a reliable support unit for research activities and also being a model for other institutions in Tanzania.”

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With the close of 2017, NCURA wishes to thank and acknowledge the outgoing chair of the Select Committee on Peer Programs, David Mayo, California Institute of Technology, who served as chair of this Select Committee for the past year. Rotating off the committee will be Gunta Liders, University of Rochester, who served the last three years as Vice Chair, Chair, and Past Chair and Mary Louise Healy, Johns Hopkins University.

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