

Africa has a need for higher education

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Letters from Academia

powers who not only exploited the natural resources and peoples of that part of the world, but also created artificial countries regardless of the distribution of ethnic groups. And after most of those African countries became independent in the 1960s, the European powers and the U.S. continued intervening in their internal affairs by exploiting ethnic divisions they themselves had created, and by supporting despots convenient to their own political and economic interests.

To make things worse, international organizations, such as the World Bank, that were supposed to provide funding for the development of those countries, imposed policies that never included support for higher education and academia in general. Because of that, those countries saw a brain drain of people that if they had stayed in their countries of origin, would have greatly contributed to the progress of their nations. They were either relegated into oblivion within their borders or had to emigrate (mostly to the U.S. of Europe) in order to find opportunities not available to them at home.

All this has had consequences not

only on the intellectual development of these nations' populations, but also in much needed areas such as health care, basic infrastructure and economic development in general. The results? Increased poverty, instability and social injustice. And none of those things have anything to do with race. They have everything to do with the policies that developed nations have followed for centuries to control other parts of the world.

We also forget that standards for happiness are different in different cultures. In a recent study among 42,000 people from around the world conducted by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan American think tank, the people who reported having a "good day" the most were from Nigeria, in central Africa. The ones reporting having a "good day" the least? Japan.

Study after study has shown that a higher education degree increases family income, furthers life span, and makes people happier. Instead of labeling those places as "s***hole countries" what we should be doing is through either bilateral collaboration or through international agencies, increase support for higher education in those nations.

That is something that can be achieved via institution-to-institution collaboration agreements. Unfortunately, history and politics are creating a bad

environment for such collaborations. Why would people in those countries want to cooperate with institutions from countries whose leaders express such a low opinion of them? Why would those countries grant permits for U.S. university faculty to conduct research in any area within their insulted borders?

Words and attitudes have consequences. And so has ignorance.

In order to make a better world we need people from all over the world to have the opportunities to advance in different fields. To achieve that goal what we need is better leadership. One whose decisions and words are not guided by bigotry and ignorance.

Although people may think that there is no hope given the current political situation, the fact of the matter is that all of us in higher education can change things by prompting our institutions to develop collaborative efforts with institutions of those "s***hole countries." The rewards for that may be much higher than what we might expect. After all, the bottom line of higher education is to make the world better than it is today.

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One of the oldest words in the English language is bigotry. Although it has an obscure origin, everybody knows its meaning: intolerance toward the opinions, lifestyles, or identities of people who are different from the person expressing those opinions. The bigot bases such rejection of others on ignorance and usually takes such bigoted positions to insult.

In one of the many scandals that we are witnessing on a weekly basis, Donald Trump referred to all the countries of Africa, as well as Haiti and El Salvador, as "s***hole countries." The problem with this statement is that it not only reflects what the president feels, but also what many people – including some in academia – think about those from other countries.

Many people would say that these countries lack not only stable governments, but also that they have meant nothing when it comes to the modern world. Never mind that the African continent has been home to 22 Nobel Prize winners in all fields, including chemistry, physics, medicine, literature, and peace. I bet the vast majority of people, including well-educated ones who think they are not bigoted, do not know this fact.

Better known, and almost always forgotten, is that the entire African continent has at one time or another been subject to colonization by European