UF’s Excellence on Africa

One of the more important initiatives in Africa by an American academic association will be led by University of Florida faculty in July for the third time in six years. The American Political Science Association is sponsoring a two-week workshop in Burkina Faso in West Africa whose main aim is to strengthen political science research across sub-Saharan Africa. The workshop will be led by UF professors Leo Villalón and Ken Wald of the Department of Political Science, and will include 22 young African political scientists from 17 countries, as well as four American Ph.D. students.

Villalón is the former Director of UF’s Center for African Studies and a leading researcher on Islam in African politics. Wald is a Distinguished Professor and an expert on religion in politics in the US and elsewhere and has taught around the world.

Wald described the central questions of the workshop as, “How do political scientists think of religion as a political factor? Can it promote democracy? Can it undermine it?” Working with three African colleagues, Villalón and Wald will advise the African scholars on research projects, lead discussions of work in progress, and organize field trips in and around Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso’s capital.

This is one among many indications and outcomes of UF’s leading position among American universities on research on and involvement in Africa. The University of Florida’s Center for African Studies is one of 12 National Resource Centers in African Studies supported by the Title VI program of the US Department of Education. The Center also receives support from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and other UF sources, and its affiliated faculty and students generate many research grants across a large number of fields and from numerous scientific, government, and international sources.

UF is notable for the breadth and strength of its research and teaching across many disciplines ranging from the arts and music to infectious disease and public health, climate and environmental change, wildlife, agriculture, and architecture, in addition to the liberal arts and sciences fields of history, political science, anthropology and archaeology, geography, linguistics, and literature.

Among other regions of Africa, UF faculty and students have developed a particular expertise on the countries of the Sahel, the band of dryland regions south of the Sahara, which include portions of countries stretching from Senegal on the Atlantic coast to Chad in the middle of the continent.

Professor Villalón has received two major research grants focused on this region in the last few years. One, the Trans-Sahara Elections Project, which was co-managed by Professor Daniel Smith of UF’s Political Science Department, brought political researchers and practitioners from several Sahelian countries to the US to observe US elections and meet US politicians, as well as taking them to neighboring countries, many of which are undergoing democratic and other political transitions. The other is a $1.25 million three-year grant to develop the only program in the U.S. focused on the socio-political dynamics of the largely Muslim Sahel as a sub-region. In his grant application, Villalón presciently suggested the possibility that the Libyan revolution of 2011 might spill over into Mali. This in fact happened soon afterwards, as violence flared in northern Mali in 2012. The traumatic effects of this turmoil have reverberated across the entire region and reached into North and West Africa and elsewhere.