For Immediate Release:

New Master of Science program educates African students in Africa

URBANA, Ill. – Many African students travel to the United States or Europe to pursue advanced degrees. Many do not return to their home country to practice their profession. This tradition saps African countries of some of their brightest talent. A new Master of Science degree program in West Africa developed by researchers at the University of Illinois will help fill this void with academically trained agricultural professionals.

"Training Africa's next generation of plant breeders is imperative to improve the continent's crop yields and crop nutrition towards the ultimate goal of food security," says Rita Mumm, professor emerita of crop sciences at U of I.

Mumm serves as education and training lead for the Soybean Innovation Lab at U of I, a five-year program to establish sustainable production and utilization of soybean in Africa, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). She led the effort to establish the new master's degree program together with Professor Eric Danquah, director of the West Africa Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI), and Christiana Amoatey, head of the crop science department at the University of Ghana.

This high-quality Master of Science program complements WACCI’s existing Ph.D. program in plant breeding and also promotes development of the new faculty WACCI has recruited to train future African leaders in crop improvement.

The first five students, four from Ghana and one from Ethiopia, began the master's program last August. The core courses include statistics, experimental design, population genetics, plant breeding, and genomic applications to crop improvement. Though based in Ghana, the program includes a summer mentoring and internship program in the United States where the students will visit participating universities and work with the private sector, particularly the U.S. seed industry.

"This master’s degree program is for African students in Africa," says Peter Goldsmith, principal investigator for the Soybean Innovation Lab. "It is important to fill the gap at the master's or technical level because there are not enough well-trained people managing the research plots at the region's research stations." Many of the national programs for crop improvement in Africa hire MS-level plant breeders to lead plant breeding programs.

“The initial funding from U of I’s College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences Office of International Programs served to seed additional funding ($850,000) from the USAID Mission in Ghana, evidencing the value of this new master’s program to train West African scientists,” Goldsmith says.

To learn more about the MPhil Masters Program, and the Soybean Innovation Lab, visit their website at: soybeaninnovationlab.illinois.edu/

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