Nigeria: higher education and the challenge of access

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CHAPTER 4

Nigeria: Higher Education and the Challenge of Access

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> *No matter how you design a scholarship, the challenges will come; what matters is how you address them. Personally, I'm always praying and hoping some people will pick up after IFP has ended, because in this region, almost everyone needs help. Unfortunately, most of the other scholarships focus on academic excellence. Could they inadvertently be helping to widen rather than close the gap between privilege and disadvantage?*
> —A West African IFP official (2006 interview)

Access to higher education remains a major development challenge in Africa. The quotation above provides a hint of this and of the promises and antinomies of some of the interventions aimed at addressing the challenge of access, such as fellowships. Nigeria presents an interesting case, not only of how specific social and cultural factors have impeded access to tertiary education, but also of the limited successes and false steps that have characterized interventions over the years.

A comparatively recent, and perhaps the most radical, initiative toward promoting access to higher education in Nigeria is the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program (IFP). IFP selected its first round of Fellows in 2001, and from its inception, the program confronted challenges. In this chapter, we examine these challenges, asking how IFP is distinctive both in its goals and in its approaches to some of the same obstacles that other programs with similar goals have confronted in the past. Specifically, we explore how IFP partner organizations, the Association of African Universities (AAU)[1] and Pathfinder International,[2] have worked to

achieve their goals. How have they established their role and credibility in a country that is, as we suggest below, "awash with scholarships," and with programs that are widely known as less than transparent? How have they defined "social disadvantage" in a country where "almost everyone needs help"? And how have they operationalized the implementation of IFP while grappling with uncertainties and difficulties in defining as well as reaching their target groups?

Although the Nigerian university system has experienced tremendous growth in the last few decades, the profile of the university student population continues to reveal entrenched class, gender, and other disparities. Furthermore, both federal and state targeted admission policies, and scholarship programs seem to have been pursued or applied haphazardly and have thus far fared poorly in reversing the equity and access challenges that continue to bedevil the university system.

Data on the role of scholarships in broadening educational access in Nigeria are scanty and, where they exist, are unreliable. The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) claims on its website that its "massive" Federal Government Scholarship award program for postgraduate and undergraduate students aims, among other things, to "equalize or balance educational opportunities" and to make education more accessible to "indigent," "handicapped," and other "less privileged" students (FME 2005). Many of the federating states have similar schemes. There is no doubt that government scholarships were a principal means of attaining university education in the first two decades of Nigeria's independence; however, it is doubtful if the levels of efficiency and transparency of the 1960s and 1970s have been sustained to this day. Government scholarship programs, like other public programs in Nigeria, are rife with deeply inefficient implementation standards. Poor (and possibly nonexistent) standards potentially rob the programs of the necessary transparency and integrity. Local implementers of IFP in Nigeria are acutely conscious of this problem.

There is a further sense in which it can be said that Nigeria, a country where "everyone needs help," is awash with scholarships and claims of scholarships. There are some international fellowship opportunities, such as those offered by the Commonwealth, for postgraduate education. Others are offered by foreign universities. Petroleum companies, businesses in the financial services sector, many village and town associations, and even certain rich individuals all have scholarship programs. The transnational oil companies target some of their scholarships at

indigenes of their host communities as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives. Many young people have gained access to university education through one or a combination of these. Assuming there have been systematic evaluations of the transparency, public perceptions, and beneficiary experiences of these various scholarship programs, data from such evaluations are not readily accessible.

Against this background, we pose the question, how, in seeking to translate the social justice philosophy of IFP into practice in Nigeria, have the local partners addressed what we call "implementational integrity" issues? How has the program sought to institutionalize the norms of transparency, accountability, and thoroughness in defining and reaching its targets? To this question we turn in more detail below.

Our premise is that a close examination of IFP philosophy, implementation strategies, and the ways in which local partner organizations have tackled Nigerian challenges—especially those pertaining to program transparency and administrative integrity—could reveal important lessons not only for the Nigerian government, but also for educators and private higher education funders who seek to reverse the impact of educational inequality in Nigeria.

The Social Landscape of Higher Education in Nigeria

The advent of tertiary education in Nigeria may be dated from 1932, when the British colonial authorities established the Yaba Higher College. In 1948, the University of Ibadan, then a College of the University of London, was established. By 1962, there were five universities.[3] Since then the country has seen robust growth: in 2001, Nigeria had 51 state and federal universities; by 2005, the number had risen to 80 (including private universities). This rapid growth, in student enrollments and graduates as well as institutions, masks an array of problems of access, quality of instruction (Mahtani 2005), and the end use of the education acquired. Here, we focus on the problem of access. Simply put, who gets university education (Brennan, King, and LeBeau 2004, 17)? In fact, only 4 percent of high school graduates (the 20–24 age cohort) gain admission into Nigerian universities (Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner 2005). The proportion of South African high school graduates enrolled in universities, by comparison, is much higher (17 percent in 1994; see Hassim, this volume). The enrollment figures for Nigeria are even smaller when we focus on postgraduate education.

In spite of Nigeria's rich endowment in both natural and human resources, the country remains poor, with a per capita annual income of $1,400. This persistent poverty is sometimes attributed to decades of "political instability, corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and poor macroeconomic management" (Central Intelligence Agency 2007), or, in another line of analysis, to externally imposed, neoliberal models of development (Dibua 2006).

Nigeria attaches great importance to university education, and there is a large pool of high school graduates from which the universities can meet their student enrollment requirements. Tuition fees are comparatively low, especially at the state-funded universities, and a national policy emphasizes the extension of educational opportunities to indigenes of geopolitical regions officially designated as "educationally disadvantaged." Disparities in access to university education persist, however, especially along geo-ethnic, gender, and socio-economic lines. One of the most striking disparities is between the North and South. Although 54 percent of the country's population lives in the North, university students from northern zones constituted 15 percent of enrollments in 2001 and 18 percent in 2005, while students from the South represented the remaining 85 percent in 2001 and 82 percent two years later.

How did the North come to lag so significantly behind the South educationally? Some of the answer lies in colonial history. When Western education was introduced into Nigeria during the mid nineteenth century by British Christian missionaries, Britain had no clear policy of promoting education, other than to establish a few schools and give grants to support a school system that was essentially part of missionary expansion. This educational system only benefited the South, where missionary activities were concentrated. In the North, Islamic education had taken root, and Western education was widely disdained as a tool of Christian evangelism.

Some contemporary analysts of the North-South educational divide have blamed the "misguided colonial educational policy in Northern Nigeria" for underdevelopment (Mustapha 2005, 6). Others have suggested (Aluede 2006, 188) that entrenched Islamic values and practices have bolstered cultural practices in which northern women are excluded from both the higher education system and a broad spectrum of socio-economic and political roles (Uduigwomen 2003, 2–5).

Certain policy steps taken at regional levels in the country's immediate pre-independence history and after independence also help to explain the gap in

educational development between the North and the South. For example, universal primary education programs were implemented in western and eastern Nigeria, but not in the North, in the 1950s. Between 1979 and 1983, during a short spell of democratic rule in which different political parties controlled different states and implemented policies in their areas, free primary education was introduced in western and midwestern Nigeria, then controlled by the Unity Party of Nigeria, and in the Igbo-speaking eastern states controlled by the Nigerian Peoples Party. The northern governments did not take any steps to adopt or implement educational policies similar to those that have led to increases in enrollment in all tiers of education in the South.

Resulting from these historical and political factors, and partly bolstering them, is poverty (Mustapha 2005). Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the depth and severity of poverty in the North, especially in the rural areas, at a time when the South witnessed improvements in these indices (Aigbokhan 2000, 2). The web of disadvantage in the North reveals other attributes (*ThisDay* 2005), all of which have directly or indirectly affected tertiary educational attainment in the North relative to the South, especially at a time when free education has been abolished at all levels of the Nigerian educational system.

The problem of low educational attainment has been further compounded by integrity and transparency problems that have marred the implementation of interventions such as affirmative action university admission policies (targeted at the "educationally disadvantaged" states of the North and elsewhere) and higher education scholarships (targeted at people of "underprivileged" backgrounds). We return to this problem below.

Gender and Other Barriers to University Education

Across Nigeria, not only in the North, women are excluded from higher education and universities exhibit gender-biased profiles. A sample of eleven universities in all six geopolitical zones reveals gendered disparities in student enrollment. Nationally, 35 percent of new enrollments in the 2000–2001 academic year were women; in 2005, the proportion was 36 percent. The proportion of female graduates (out of the total pool of graduates at various levels of the university system) stood at 34 percent and 36 percent in the 2000–2001 and 2004–2005 academic sessions (National Bureau of Statistics 2005).

University	Total enrollment	Male	Female	Percent female
Northwest Zone				
Bayero University, Kano	7,493	1,853	5,640	75
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria*	29,633	27,244	2,389	8
Northeast Zone				
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University	7,069	5,825	1,244	18
Northcentral Zone				
Federal University of Technology, Minna	15,095	9,854	5,241	35
Southwest Zone				
University of Ibadan*	18,957	12,070	6,887	36
University of Lagos*	27,532	15,199	12,333	45
Obafemi Awolowo University*	25,156	17,144	8,012	32
University of Ado-Ekiti	9,766	6,114	3,652	37
Southeast Zone				
Abia State University	16,913	8,455	8,458	50
Southsouth Zone				
University of Nigeria, Nsukka*	36,188	16,593	19,595	54
University of Port Harcourt	16,506	10,460	6,046	37

*First-generation universities—see endnote 3

Table 4.1 Gender disparity in student enrollment in Nigerian universities, 2004–2005 [Source: Constructed with data from the National Universities Commission]

For the 2004–2005 academic year (Table 4.1), there were more new male students in all but three of the universities, namely University of Nigeria (54 percent female), Bayero University (75 percent female), and Abia State University (50 percent female). At Ahmadu Bello University, a "first-generation" university, women comprised only 8 percent of total new enrollment. These figures suggest that sociocultural attitudes in Nigeria do not yet fully support the education of women. With regard to the North, it has been argued that religion underlies their educational exclusion (Uduigwomen 2003; Aluede 2006). Throughout Nigeria, however, "the patriarchal nature of the institutions and the male culture" (Odejide, Akanji, and Odelkunle 2006, 555) in which women find themselves remains the key issue of gender-based educational inclusion/exclusion.

Class is also a crucial factor in the structuring of the social landscape of higher education, and parental educational attainment is an important measure of who is "advantaged" or "disadvantaged." "Parents' higher education attainment, especially mothers' education and experiences of other siblings and members of the extended family who had graduated from universities, appears to be a catalyst" for [especially] female education (Odejide, Akanji, and Odekunle 2006, 556). Odejide et al. reveal that young Nigerians from homes where parents and/or siblings are university graduates tend to regard education as a "right" and university education as a "norm" and that female academics in Nigeria are mostly from "western educated, middle class backgrounds." Against this background, IFP application screening and final selection panels are asked to focus especially on talented applicants whose parents are not university graduates.

The Nigerian university education system also reveals low levels of participation by people with physical disabilities, widely regarded as a "curse from God who repays everyone according to his or her deeds . . . [M]ost parents of handicapped children do not send them to school" (Abang 1988, 72–73). Parents of physically disabled children are not keen to "publicize" their association with such a "curse." According to one IFP Fellow with a physical disability interviewed by these authors, there may be a more practical explanation for the underrepresentation of people with disabilities. Nigerian universities lack a "user-friendly" teaching and learning environment for people with special needs (Abang 1988, 77).

Although the rapid expansion of higher education in Nigeria since independence in 1960 has been widely recognized as "a pillar of the developmental ideology"

(Brennan, King, and Lebeau 2004, 12), the foregoing discussion suggests that the expansion has not adequately translated to broad-based access. Barriers to university education persist along lines of geo-ethnic origin/location, gender, social class, and physical ability.

Broadening Access: Institutional Expansion, Admissions Policy, and Scholarships

The most visible steps the Nigerian government has taken toward broadening access to university education since independence have been to increase the number of universities and to ensure that federal universities charge very low tuition fees. However, investment in research and educational infrastructure has been vastly inadequate (Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner 2005; Akpan 1990). Efforts have also been made to ensure a fairly even spread of universities across the country and, since the early 1980s, to recognize the rights of the federating states to establish and run universities, although the consequences of such expansion have not always been positive (Anyanwu 2006, 300-01). Private universities emerged on the higher education landscape in the mid to late 1990s, targeting mainly children of the political and economic elite, who command the financial resources to escape the unpredictable academic calendars, decaying infrastructure, and low staff morale at government-owned universities.

Affirmative action admissions policies have also helped to extend opportunities to many students who would otherwise have had to seek university placement based strictly on academic merit, measured by their performance on the University Matriculation Examination (UME).[4] For example, a federal university located in Cross River State is required by law to preferentially admit students (who might not meet the national UME cut-score) from (a) its immediate "locality," (b) a specified number of other states of the federation, for purposes of fostering national unity, and (c) states designated by the federal government as "educationally disadvantaged" (see Table 4.2). This designation applies to all of Nigeria's northern states and three of the states in the South geopolitical zone. States in the Southeast and Southwest are all "educationally advantaged."

The preferential admissions policy, which stipulates quotas for "advantaged" and "disadvantaged" states, has not enjoyed unanimous support in Nigeria. While some view it as crucial for broadening educational access, as it creates special

opportunities for high school graduates from states where rates of higher educational attainment have historically been low, others have criticized the policy as rewarding mediocrity and punishing excellence. There is an explicitly politicized variant of this criticism: the quota policy was used as a "ploy" by the "northern-controlled" military authorities during Nigeria's thirty-odd years of military rule[5] to slow down the pace of educational achievement in the South while "rewarding" the North for its unwillingness to embrace the importance of Western education (cf. Uduigwomen 2003; Aluede 2006). This criticism highlights not only the difficulty of redressing regional imbalances in higher educational participation in the Nigerian context, but also the imperative of maintaining the utmost level of transparency in implementing interventions.

No federal university in the country has fully complied with the admission quotas, partly because the quotas have not coincided with student preferences. Arguably, most students find it convenient to apply to universities in their immediate geopolitical and cultural neighborhoods, and as a result, some universities have exceeded the quota for "locality" by as much as 70 percent (Akpan 1990). More fundamentally, however, the profile of the university student population continues to be characterized by disparities, a further indication that even state-imposed admission quotas have not redressed the problem of exclusion (see Table 4.3).

Institution	**Admission Criterion (Weighted)**			
	Merit	Immediate locality	Educationally disadvantaged states	Institutional discretion
Federal universities	30–40	30	20–30	10
Federal universities of technology	—	20	—	80

Table 4.2 Admission criteria and quotas in Nigerian federal universities [Source: Akpan 1990, 299]

Geopolitical Zone of Origin	2004–5 Academic Session				2000–1 Academic Session			
	Male	Female	Total	Geopolitical zone as % of national enrollment	Male	Female	Total	Geopolitical zone as % of national enrollment
Northwest	3,158	1,253	4,411	3.6	1,110	440	1,550	3.3
Northeast	3,027	1,259	4,286	3.5	649	359	1,008	2.2
Northcentral	8,824	4,437	13,261	10.9	2,927	1,673	4,600	10.1
Total—North	15,009	6,949	21,958	18.0	4,686	2,472	7,158	15.6
Southwest	13,898	9,003	22,901	18.8	8,359	4,480	12,839	28.1
Southeast	20,141	20,885	41,026	33.7	6,780	6,614	13,394	29.3
Southsouth	20,052	15,736	35,788	29.4	7,246	5,089	12,335	27.0
Total—South	54,091	45,624	99,715	81.9	22,385	16,183	38,568	84.55
TOTAL	69,100	52,573	121,673	100	27,071	18,655	45,726	100

Table 4.3 Geopolitical origin of new university students enrolled in 2000–1 and 2004–5 [Source: Adapted from the Joint Admissions and Matriculations Board (JAMB) (www.jambng.com)]

Redress through Integrity: IFP Intervention in Nigeria

IFP was launched to provide exceptional individuals in a specified number of developing countries with the opportunity of acquiring post-baccalaureate education, in the hope that they will use such education to "become leaders in their respective fields, furthering development in their own countries and greater economic and social justice worldwide."[6] What distinguishes IFP from, say, the Fulbright or Rhodes fellowships, is that it seeks out these "exceptional individuals" primarily in social groups that are systematically excluded from advanced education for any number of reasons: "caste, ethnicity, gender, geographic isolation, language, physical disability, political instability, race, religion or socio-economic status" (IFP 2004).

Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal (all in West Africa) were the only African countries included in the "pilot" phase of the program, for reasons that were both institutional and geopolitical. As Joan Dassin, Executive Director of IFP, explained:

> We had already identified a grantee organization, the Association of African Universities (AAU), that we felt had the capacity to carry out the program for the sub-region. We included Nigeria (in addition to Ghana and Senegal) as part of the West Africa group because (a) the Ford Foundation office is located in Lagos and would be able to provide us with support on the ground to help launch the program, and (b) Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa and certainly one of the most dominant and important, would be a critical testing ground for IFP (because of its size, diversity, history of regional conflict, etc.).[7]

The earliest group of Nigerian Fellows was selected in 2001 from a pool of approximately 2,000 applicants (see Table 4.4). By 2005, over 100 Fellows had been selected.

Between 2001 and 2002, the management of the fellowship in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal rested solely with the Association of African Universities, the "apex organization and forum for consultation, exchange of information and cooperation among institutions of higher learning in Africa" (AAU 2009). In 2002, the need to reach candidates beyond the major cities and principal universities in the three countries led to decentralization of the program to the sub-regional level. In Nigeria, Pathfinder International was appointed as the "country partner" to work with the AAU; the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) became the partner in Senegal.

Administratively, there is a high degree of information sharing among the three project offices. Pathfinder (in Abuja) handles the day-to-day management of the fellowship in Nigeria. This includes determining where in the country (or toward which social groups) to focus outreach activities in a given year and managing the distribution of application forms and outreach materials. The printing of application forms and outreach materials is the responsibility of the AAU.

For virtually every implementation activity at both the AAU and Pathfinder Nigeria, there have been efforts to establish an unparalleled profile of transparency, accountability, and rigor, with the goal of taking the fellowship along a trajectory

	Male	Female	Total
2001	10	17	27
2002	5	5	10
2003	12	12	24
2004	8	12	20
2005	13	9	22
2007	12	4	16
TOTAL	**60**	**59**	**119**

Note: Interviews not conducted/Selections not made in 2006

Table 4.4 Gender distribution of Nigerian fellows, 2001–2007 [Source: Constructed with data from Pathfinder Nigeria]

that might make its implementation approach an example for other educational and social justice interventions in Nigeria. We examine some of the challenges of implementation below.

"Constructing" and "Deconstructing" Social Disadvantage

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronted by both the AAU and Pathfinder Nigeria is the process of selecting awardees.[8] In this process, the partners must systematically transform IFP's philosophy into reality. As Joan Dassin, the program's Executive Director, notes, there is "no 'one standard' about what it means to be from an excluded or marginalized community" (CHEPS 2004, 4); this is where the partners not only encounter the "reality" of social disadvantage, but also must construct it. From the time the completed application forms are received, every selection activity is about finding the point where at least four different sets of constructions of social disadvantage intersect. These constructions are those of the AAU and Pathfinder, the Fellowship applicants, the tri-national panel (of Ghanaian,

Nigerian, and Senegalese experts) that creates the initial short list of applicants, and the final selection interview panel. Adjudicating among differing understandings of social disadvantage in the Nigerian context can entail complex conundrums and questions about the proper targets of the fellowship that do not always have clear-cut resolutions.

Once the application forms and outreach materials have been designed, printed, and distributed, the direct role of IFP's staff in the selection process is limited to the screening of applications, which entails ensuring that only applications accompanied by the required supporting documents make it through to the short-listing stage. The screening takes place in Ghana. The screened applications are subsequently passed to a sub-regional short-listing panel consisting of Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Senegalese experts (panelists from Senegal and Nigeria must be resident in Ghana). The committee receives prior briefing about IFP and its philosophy. As part of their responsibilities, the panelists are expected to help authenticate (or deconstruct) the stories of marginalization that appear in the applications. In 2004, for example, this panel brought to the project officers' attention the fact that a disproportionately large number of Nigerian applicants presented themselves as orphans, an indication that IFP's philosophy of seeking to help the socially disadvantaged to acquire advanced education could have appeared to applicants as a package to assist orphans. One IFP officer recalled:

> We did not find it funny at all that every applicant had lost his or her dad or mom! Every applicant was orphaned at an early age! People seemed to have come to know the "secret" of IFP: all they simply had to do was tailor their stories to beat the selection process. So we had to ask ourselves, "Is being orphaned all that marginalization is about?"

What the apparently exaggerated or fictitious stories of marginalization revealed to the implementing organizations were: (a) the weaknesses of the application form as a screening tool, (b) the need to refine the questions in the form, and (c) the limitations of a short-listing committee, whose decisions are based principally on applicants' pen-and-paper responses to the qualitative instruments. In response, the organizations worked to develop an interview process that would include scrutiny of stories told by applicants in their applications, or what IFP project officers refer to as "creative interviewing."

The three- to four-day short-listing exercise in Accra concludes with a meeting between the panelists and the project officers, who then return to their countries with their short lists. With input from Pathfinder Nigeria, AAU writes letters inviting the short-listed applicants to face-to-face interviews. The letters are conveyed to the applicants by Pathfinder Nigeria, who also handles the local organizing of the interviews.

The selection interview panelists are constituted by Pathfinder Nigeria in consultation with the AAU and with input from the Ford Foundation office in Lagos. Usually, out of ten possible panelists, the AAU recommends five based on their biographical data (highlighting ethnicity, residence, and academic background). While the regional process of constituting this panel is meant to emphasize transparency, it can also help to shield the country partners from elements who might want to interfere with the transparency of the process (a well-known problem in Nigeria) or from untoward accusations by unsuccessful candidates. Pathfinder Nigeria can thus assure its local constituency that although the selection interviews are held locally, the selection process is done sub-regionally.

The selection criteria reveal how the implementing organizations attempt to answer the question, "What forms of social disadvantage have direct implications for educational inclusion/exclusion in the Nigerian context?" The criteria include: economic status of candidate's family, candidate's religious background, geographic location of schools attended by candidate, personal family history (such as being orphaned at an early age), position in family, gender, membership in an educationally "advantaged" or "disadvantaged" ethnic group, and political status (such as being a refugee). The use of these yardsticks can be traced to the beginning of the program in West Africa, when, after initial discussions between IFP New York and the AAU on the philosophy and objectives of the fellowship, the AAU consulted with local stakeholders (mainly academics, civil society practitioners, and other experts) on how these could best be operationalized in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. At least one expert at that initial meeting was still involved with the AAU as of December 2006.

Academic excellence is not downplayed as an eligibility criterion. Indeed, our inquiry revealed that the AAU and Pathfinder Nigeria would not select a candidate who showed little promise of succeeding or excelling at a postgraduate level. However, because pre-tertiary school location is viewed as a factor in social disadvantage,[9] and people who experienced deprivations at the pre-tertiary level

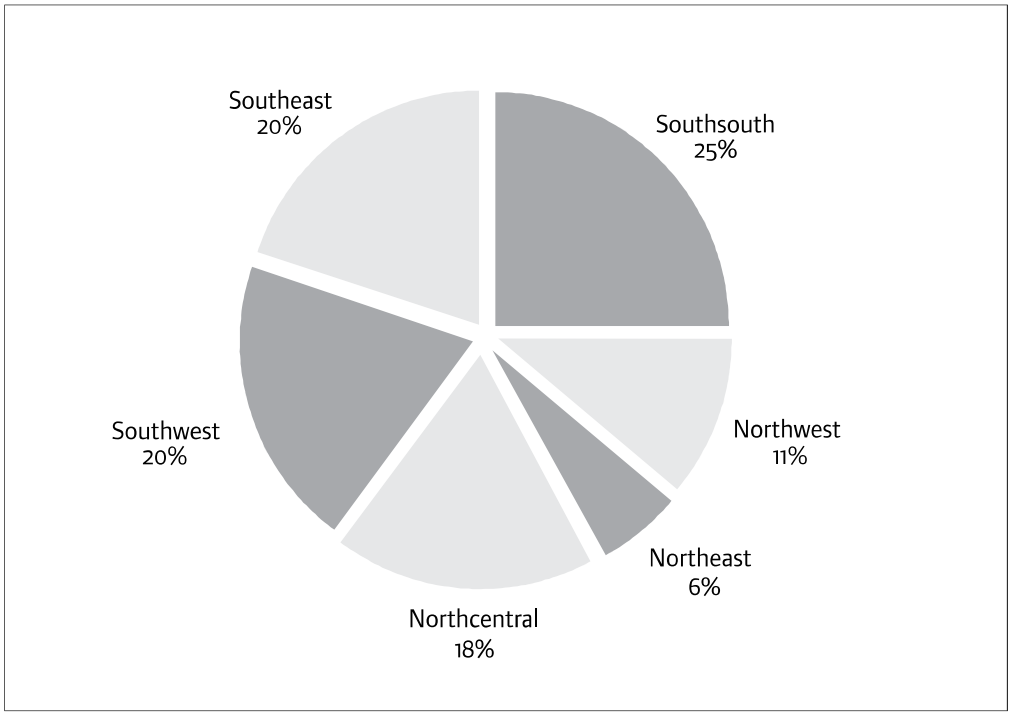

Figure 4.1 Geopolitical distribution of Nigerian Fellows [Source: Constructed with data from Pathfinder Nigeria]

almost always performed relatively poorly in their first and second years at university, the implementing organizations often urged the selection panel to give greater consideration to a candidate's performance during his or her last two years of undergraduate studies rather than focusing on the candidate's overall undergraduate performance.

The selection criterion of ethnic origin (as a basis of disadvantage) echoes the Nigerian government's policy of seeking to redress regional educational inequality by categorizing states as educationally "advantaged" or "disadvantaged." This categorization remains, as elaborated earlier, a contested issue in the sense that it may imply a ploy to "hold back" advancement in the educationally "more privileged" states of the country (which at present are mainly those in the Yoruba-speaking Southwest and the Igbo-speaking Southeast geopolitical zones). In practice, however, 35 percent of IFP fellowships have been awarded since 2001 to applicants originating from the three ("disadvantaged") northern zones and 40 percent to applicants from the relatively "advantaged" Southwest and Southeast (see Figure 4.1).

The AAU and Pathfinder have an explanation for this contradiction: there was no deliberate attempt in the early selection cycles (notably 2001) to achieve ethnic balance in the selection outcomes, because no one knew how Nigerians would actually respond to the new fellowship program.

Ethnic origin began to be consciously emphasized when it became clear that certain states and regions were overrepresented. This emphasis is now an official policy at Pathfinder, as described in an interview with a Pathfinder official:

> We have insisted for current Fellow recruitment purposes that more attention be paid to getting more Fellows from other states where we have not had Fellows before. In other words, there is a bias now for getting more applications and favoring candidates from these "newer" states. Not that we neglect those states where we traditionally have more applicants; rather, when it comes to final selection and two candidates from different zones perform equally, the likelihood now is that we would choose from a state where we have had only one (or no) Fellow in the past.

Similarly, although seeking to actualize IFP's preferences regarding gender in their day-to-day activities in Nigeria, the implementing organizations only recently began to approach gender as a distinct "advantage/disadvantage" indicator requiring conscious monitoring. According to one Pathfinder official:

> There was no deliberate attempt at promoting gender equality in the initial [selection cycles]. At the beginning, it appeared that more females than males were willing to apply, and so more women than men went through to the interview stages, and more females got the grant.

Significantly, the local implementers attribute the male/female disparity to the fact that many Nigerians (particularly men) have little confidence in public programs that operate on the "many are called, few are chosen" principle. One Pathfinder official observed that few Nigerians believed that IFP, or any other similar program, could be implemented in a completely transparent manner:

> One applicant in 2001 who was interviewed telephonically thought the interviewees would be all foreigners, which is why he agreed to be interviewed in the first place. His trust level changed when he was awarded the scholarship.

> I believe this issue of trust affected many males and possibly made them not apply. Later, as people began to perceive that the "Nigerian factor," nepotism and similar transparency issues, for example, was not in operation in the IFP award scheme, the number of male applicants increased.

Thus when gender equality first began to be emphasized, it was to ensure that women did not outnumber men, as was the case in respect of the South. Later, it became a problem of making sure that men did not outnumber women, especially in the Northeast and Northwest geopolitical zones of the country, where "culturally induced" marginalization of women is more entrenched. Even so, the fifth cohort of Fellows had more males than females overall.

As things stand today, the AAU and Pathfinder Nigeria regard gender as a critical criterion of advantage and disadvantage, especially because, as one IFP officer put it, "most of the existing postgraduate scholarships peg the age limit at thirty-five. Clearly this puts many women at a disadvantage. Our experience in West Africa is that women return to school after forty—after they have had children."

The inconsistencies and contradictions highlighted above have been of concern not only to the program's implementers, but also to members of the interview panels. According to one panelist, the question of "fairness" is key:

> If you do a mapping of Nigeria based on the selection of Fellows for the past three years, check if it is a true reflection of the need in various geopolitical settings. It is not! There are areas where Fellows have not been selected from, especially from the northern parts of the country. No part of this country should be disenfranchised; let there be a fair representation of the various zones. Apart from this, emphasis should be on the potential contributions of Fellows, not on the socio-economic status of families. [Interview panelists] use family background and history; it has too much weight. It must be given a minor weight.

The implementing organizations place a considerable premium on the work of the interview panel, which is made up of knowledgeable people from different fields. The suggestions of this panel have played an important role in shaping AAU and Pathfinder's definitions of advantage/disadvantage. This is reflected in the shifts that have occurred over the years in the way the eligibility criteria have been applied. During the first two selection cycles, the criteria were not weighted, and

interview panelists used their individual discretion to allocate points. By 2003, the scoring system had changed to assign specified weight to different criteria, but the broad eligibility criteria continued to be defined in terms of "basic eligibility," "educational background," "leadership qualities," and "career and professional goals."

In 2005, the approach was adjusted to allow the selection panel to use more flexible scoring for each of the four criteria clusters. "Educational background" and "leadership qualities/community service" were given equal weight, but greater weight than "career and professional goals." "Basic eligibility" received fewer points. And a new criterion specific to the interview was added, known as "general presentation."

One implication of these shifts is that being "disadvantaged," always one of several criteria, was increasingly contextualized as other criteria became more nuanced and elaborated through the panelists' and partners' experience. At the same time, questions about how much to emphasize the program's leadership focus and how "change agents" should best be identified and supported emerged as a contested area. We see this in the following statement by an IFP officer:

> At the interview stage, "total marginalization" no longer counts—since the short-listing process has somehow ensured that everyone that gets to this stage has experienced some form of marginalization. What we expect at the interview stage is something like leadership qualities; after all, the program is about going forward (marginalized or not) to effect change in society. That is why at the interview stage, the score for leadership qualities or educational background could be as high as 30, while marginalization [basic eligibility] has a maximum score of only 13. The question is: is this candidate a possible change agent or are we looking for marginalized people who merely want a higher degree for their own individual betterment?

While most Fellows, especially since 2003, have been selected on the basis of a combination of criteria, this comment reveals the kinds of tensions that almost inevitably emerge in the course of the selection process. How should committee members evaluate an outstanding candidate who excels in both academic achievement and commitment to working with marginalized groups and whose own socioeconomic background is relatively privileged? How should such a candidate be compared with a more profoundly disadvantaged applicant who simply does not

convince the panelists that he or she has the qualities of social leadership or commitment? No ready answers are available, but open, ongoing discussion of such issues is required of a program that is to remain transparent.

As indicated earlier, the implementation of a philosophy of international higher education based on social justice involved the intersection of the experiences of the AAU and Pathfinder officials, the interpretations and recommendations of their consultants and panelists, and the voices of fellowship applicants themselves. Interestingly, when the AAU reviewed its criteria for "social disadvantage" in 2005 for the three West African countries, the result was that the term had broadly the same definition as when the program was first introduced. Marginalization still largely coincided with coming from a poor family, being orphaned early in life, being the eldest of many siblings, being a single parent, being disabled, being a refugee, coming from an educationally "disadvantaged" ethnic group, or being female. The tasks of the selection committee have evolved, however, and now include the authentication of personal stories of marginality as well as the selection of Fellows who, in panelists' judgment, would go beyond simply redressing their own marginality. The latter consideration has led to the extension of the fellowship to a small number of people from relatively advantaged socio-economic backgrounds who have what might be termed a "heart for the community."

Outreach

As a new intervention, IFP entered a landscape, as we noted above, filled with long-standing programs such as the Commonwealth Scholarships and faced the challenge of how to communicate its rather radical intent. In the first two selection cycles especially, the philosophy of IFP, the promise it held for Nigerian society, and its implementation ethos were not well known. Some members of the first two cohorts of Fellows revealed to these authors that they had provided details in their applications about their experiences of disadvantage somewhat warily, not fully realizing that the fellowship was actually designed to support people in their circumstances. A number of the contradictions elaborated earlier arose from the fact that, in the early phase of the program, the main distribution centers for the application forms were universities, where men are numerically and socially dominant.

Because IFP offered opportunities for Fellows to study abroad, the AAU also faced an important challenge in that it did not want to contribute to the already

acute problem of "brain drain" from West Africa. Initially hesitant to invite excessive media attention, the program subsequently began to address this challenge more assertively. As an IFP officer indicated to these authors:

> One of our shortfalls had been working in the quiet. We were not as known as we would have preferred. I remember being asked [by one prominent person], "Your program has such radical and unique objectives; why are you not making any noise about it?" But things are changing: we now have outreach activities that effectively double as media events. It is even easier now that we have a sizeable number of Fellows who have completed their studies and returned home.

As the program has developed, steps have been taken to address the challenge of broadening outreach. Some simple practical changes have been made, including updating IFP databases in Abuja and Accra. Application forms can now be obtained in many local government offices—local government being the third layer of government in Nigeria (after federal and state), and the layer closest to the populace. This new channel complemented the conventional channels of accessing the forms (the Internet, universities, and Pathfinder offices in Lagos and Abuja). There were renewed efforts to ensure that information on eligibility became widely accessible and that application forms reached remote rural areas as well as local governments and states that in the past had relatively few applicants. The offices of some NGOs (non-governmental organizations), especially those with rural networks, were tapped into as IFP outreach centers. Applicants can now submit their completed forms to designated NGOs and government offices in their localities, knowing that the forms will reach Pathfinder's office in Abuja within the stipulated deadlines. These efforts suggest that the local partners are increasingly attentive to the role of public awareness in sustaining the image of IFP as the program attaches greater importance to transparency and integrity.

Even without a major media campaign to promote the fellowship in Nigeria, the AAU and Pathfinder increasingly undertake grass-roots forms of outreach. But perhaps the greatest contributions to enhanced awareness of the promise and significance of IFP will be the individual and collective activities of current and former holders of the fellowship. There has been a strong momentum of communication, for example, within the Nigerian IFP alumni community since early 2007. Barring

funding constraints and problems of coordination, exclusionary definitions of membership criteria and/or activity areas, and poor networking between home- and foreign-based alumni, the Nigerian IFP alumni community seems well placed to enhance the program's profile and visibility. As at other program sites, the incorporation of alumni in the process of recruitment and selection promises to strengthen both their role and the effectiveness of the program.

Conclusion

The implementation of IFP in West Africa has been based on a sub-regional and a country-specific focus. Since the appointment of Pathfinder Nigeria (and AAWORD Senegal) as the AAU's country partners, there has been significant collaboration among the three IFP offices and a fairly uniform set of understandings and strategies pertaining to outreach, eligibility, short-listing, and final selection—in short, a movement beyond the contradictions and inconsistencies of the early days of the program. Such collaboration has produced cohorts of Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Senegalese Fellows who carry with them country-specific and sub-regional identities simultaneously, dual identities that the emerging IFP alumni communities in the sub-region also profess.

To ensure that the IFP philosophy becomes a reality in Nigeria, the implementing organizations have drawn on the best of their knowledge and experience and the expertise available in their neighborhoods to deliver a program that has, in spite of the teething challenges discussed in this chapter, so far remained credible in the public eye. While the program strives to overcome the obstacles and practical problems that may have contributed to the selection of fewer Fellows from more "disadvantaged" regions than targeted, the general view among current and former holders of the fellowship, family members of alumni, and interview panelists is that the standards of implementation were commendably high. The combined use of sub-regional and country-specific administrative structures may contribute to the level of transparency in the implementation of IFP in Nigeria and play a role in the positive public image the program currently has in the country.

Despite the "massification" of university education in Nigeria, the system, as we have seen, is still characterized by problems that go beyond falling standards. Access and equity remain challenges, as geo-ethnic origin, location, social class, gender, and physical ability continue to be the basis of exclusion and

inclusion. These problems have persisted despite specific national interventions aimed at broadening access, partly due to the haphazard implementation of those interventions.

IFP emerged with a new, somewhat radical emphasis on redress and, since 2001, has enabled over 100 Nigerians to obtain postgraduate education. It has provided a unique form of cohort building and leadership-for-social-justice training that theoretically puts alumni in a position to pursue their post-fellowship careers with a "heart for the community." Conscious of the key challenges of program implementation in Nigeria, the administration of IFP has emphasized integrity. Although administrative challenges remain to be overcome, the local implementers have sought to actualize the program's goals through high levels of transparency and rigor in both the definition of social disadvantage and the screening and selection processes.

Most of the program's stakeholders have applauded the achievements so far, with current and former holders of the fellowship imagining their career goals in a broader, community-oriented way. Over half of the Fellows who have completed their studies have returned to Nigeria, and most are involved in a burgeoning alumni movement. A small proportion of alumni have stayed behind to seek employment in their host countries or elsewhere. A number of others who have completed their fellowships are forging ahead with their studies. IFP in West Africa has entered a new developmental trajectory in which the assessment of success will be based on what the implementing organizations do and on the activities of the alumni collective and the career trajectories of individual alumni.

Notes

1 Established in November 1967 in Rabat, Morocco, AAU seeks to be the "apex organization and forum for consultation, exchange of information and co-operation among institutions of higher learning in Africa" (http://www.aau.org/about/index.htm). From an initial membership base of thirty-four universities, the Association had 199 member universities (from 45 African countries) in 2007. Among its missions, as stated on its website, is to "raise the quality of higher education in Africa and strengthen its contribution to African development by fostering collaboration among its member institutions." The Association is headquartered in Accra, Ghana. AAU serves as IFP's umbrella partner organization in West Africa, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. The authors conducted an interview at the Association's IFP program office on November 24, 2006.

2 Pathfinder International, the U.S.-based non-governmental organization, has a country office in Abuja, Nigeria, where its work involves advocacy and action around reproductive and public health issues. One of its projects, the Community Participation for Action in the Social Sector project (COMPASS), is regarded as "one of the largest integrated health and education projects in Africa." (http://www.pathfind.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Programs_Nigeria_Projects_COMPASS.)

3 Nigeria's "first-generation" universities are: University of Ibadan (1948); University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1960); and Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly University of Ife), University of Lagos, and Ahmadu Bello University—all established in 1962. The "second-generation" (1970s) universities include: Universities of Calabar, Port Harcourt, Ilorin, Maiduguri, and Jos; Bayero University, Kano; and The Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (formerly University of Sokoto). A cluster of institutions established in the 1980s and 1990s make up the "third-generation" federal universities.

4 UME is the nationally administered test through which high school graduates are admitted into universities.

5 Through coups and counter-coups, Nigeria was ruled by the military for a total of about thirty years after independence in 1960 (that is, 1966–1979 and 1983–1999). Most of the military rulers were of northern Nigerian origin.

6 http://www.fordifp.net/index.aspx?c=1—accessed March 3, 2007.

7 An e-mail interview was conducted on October 31, 2006.

8 The analysis in this section is based mainly on documentary data obtained from the AAU and Pathfinder Nigeria as well as on in-depth interviews conducted by the authors at IFP program offices of the two organizations (i.e., in Abuja and Accra) in December 2006. Other

sources of primary data were members of the selection committee in Nigeria as well as current and former Fellows.

9 In Nigeria, geographic isolation of a school is not always correlated with poor resources: some of the better resourced schools in the country are located in rural communities while many of the country's dilapidated schools are in urban slums. Thus, the location of pretertiary schooling is not always indicative of the quality of education received.

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