Ohio State University is among a small group of institutions of higher education across the nation to receive a federal grant to further economic development efforts throughout Africa.

Researchers with Ohio State's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences are leading an effort to develop a West African agro-ecology program for sustainable food production. The initiative, in partnership with Universite Gaston Berger in Senegal, Africa, was chosen for an Africa-U.S. Higher Education Initiative Planning grant by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Higher Education for Development. The initiative has been awarded $50,000 to support the planning effort. The next step will be to review the project for additional funding over a five-to 10-year period.

The Ohio State University was among 20 institutions nationwide selected for the grant from a pool of 300 applicants.

The project is co-directed by Richard Dick, a professor with Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources, and Mateugue Diack of Universite Gaston Berger.

"This project provides a unique opportunity for a U.S. university to influence higher education in West Africa using innovative e-education technologies," said Dick, who has over 10 years of research and educational experience in Senegal. "The Senegal Ministry of Education has committed significant levels of support for higher education infrastructure and faculty salaries, and UGB has dynamic faculty and administrators who will allow the development of a state-of-the-art agro-ecology program. This favorable environment will enable permanent and long-term impacts of the project on higher education in West Africa."

The goal of the partnership is to address the severe environmental degradation of the African Sahel region, while at the same time develop the emerging agricultural industries of Northern Senegal. To meet these challenges, comprehensive degree programs in agro-ecology will be developed and taught throughout the Sahel using e-education technologies and methods.

In addition, Universite Gaston Berger core participants will participate in a study tour to Ohio State University, for a student exchange program. Also, a pilot e-education course will be developed to increase educational collaborations between the two universities. The outcome is designed to create trained agricultural professionals, practitioners and researchers to address the region's needs, of which are currently insufficient.
Mark Erbaugh, co-principal investigator and interim director of the CFAES Office of International Programs in Agriculture, said that such initiatives continue to recognize and emphasize the importance of agriculture's ties to economic development.

"Development assistance, in which food security is a part, has always been part of foreign policy, but there was a period of time in the 1990s when agriculture was left off of the agenda. Agriculture has now returned to the forefront of the development agenda in an attempt to solve the food crisis in developing countries," said Erbaugh. "If we are going to make progress in developing countries, you have to remember their agrarian roots. You can’t move forward in economic development if you don't increase their food productivity and marketing, and develop ways to sustain that."