

## Academic Networks as Research and Learning Communities

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*The Role of Networks in Advancing Human Rights: Making Human Connections* (accepted version)

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### Introduction

Networking in academia for junior scholars is often emphasized as vertical: meet and greet the big names, make a good impression when your advisor introduces you. While vertical networking is important, in this chapter, we emphasize an often-overlooked aspect of networking: building horizontal, or peer, networks (Cantwell-Chavez & Baker, 2024). In this chapter, we describe how we built our peer network, beginning from graduate school days in Los Angeles, California and now continuing in coastal Virginia, and how this network has contributed to our research, teaching, mentorship, and service.

We met as Ph.D. students at the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California at another network – the 2016 Southern California International Law Scholars (SCILS) research workshop. SCILS consists of law and political science professors from across the Southern California region. Our respective advisors helped foster this connection, as each invited us to attend and listen to leading voices in international law and politics. We got to see what high-quality research looks like, including across disciplines, and we saw how generative collegial environments are and how beneficial it is to have colleagues and collaborators at nearby institutions. Later on in graduate school, we took

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advantage of opportunities to present research at graduate student workshops hosted at each of our institutions.

While we were somewhat acquainted with each other and could see synergies in our work, our network did not truly take off until 2021, when we both found ourselves in Hampton Roads, the broad metropolitan area spanning the Virginia peninsula. Kelebogile had launched the International Justice Lab two years earlier while a pre-doctoral fellow at William & Mary (W&M), and Francesca had just taken over the Reiff Center for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution (hereafter, Reiff Center) at Christopher Newport University (CNU), in Newport News, located about 25 miles southeast from W&M's campus in Williamsburg. Our visions for IJL and the Reiff Center were – and remain – very similar: engage students in human rights research and invite human rights scholars and practitioners to campus to discuss their work and connect with faculty, students, staff, and community members (Zvobgo et al., 2023).

We each developed a speaker series and soon decided to share speakers, halving the cost and logistical burden while doubling our impact. With each institution bearing the cost of half the speakers, we could bring twice as many people to Hampton Roads as we could otherwise. This also provided an added benefit to the speakers themselves, as they could give two talks for the travel of one, which is especially attractive when traveling to an area that is harder to get to by plane. (Most of our visitors have at least one layover when traveling by air and/or fly into airports that are far away.) In our first three years, we brought about ten shared speakers per year to our institutions.

## **Research**

Our network has made key contributions to our research. First, at a very basic level, having someone with whom to bounce around early research ideas, or to refine more developed ones, has helped us start and, very importantly, conclude research projects. Interlocutors have the benefit of distance from a project and, as a result, they often can see what an author does not, can restate the author's key points more clearly, and can provide new and added perspective. For example, we have helped each other reframe papers to make them more compelling (as Francesca did in Zvobgo & Chaudoin [forthcoming]) and raised points related

to our expertise that papers should consider (as Kelebogile did in Johns & Parente [2024]). Because our backgrounds are complementary, but do not completely overlap, we can add new perspectives from different areas of international human rights, law, and justice to each other's work.

Second, bringing established and emerging scholars to our campuses has helped us initiate and develop new research collaborations. Moreover, because we have overlapping, but still different, networks, we each have been able to expand our individual networks and begin research and teaching collaborations with scholars we have introduced to one another. Emerging scholars – whose research profiles are beginning to take shape and who face similar career objectives, the clearest being tenure and promotion – make for excellent new coauthors. A shared need to develop a strong pipeline of projects on a compressed time frame is motivating; we spur each other on.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the more established scholars who have come to our institutions have provided us important mentorship – in the form of direct feedback on research and in the form of counsel about political science's hidden curriculum (including in the world of book publishing).<sup>2</sup> Through horizontal networking with each other, we have ultimately achieved vertical networking, because we know different senior scholars. For example, Francesca is now working on a project with one of the senior scholars from Kelebogile's network, whom she would not have met without Kelebogile inviting them to W&M.

These combined experiences have led to multiple publications that will come out in the next two years, including this chapter, the 2025 special issue of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, a chapter for an edited volume on structural violence, and a volume that we are co-editing on innovations in human rights data and measurement. Our edited volume is itself a network, putting scholars who may not be familiar with each other's work in conversation with each other. While our coauthorship journey is just starting, our existing collaborative network is a strong foundation for productivity and positions us well to take on new and more challenging projects, like the co-edited volume.

## Teaching

Our shared network has generated many opportunities to strengthen our teaching. First, our speaker series enhances the experience of students enrolled in our classes. Where possible, our events have functioned as co-curricular activities, where students enrolled in an international law or human rights class get to learn from experts outside the classroom. We have deliberately assigned readings written by speakers who are coming soon, so that students have some frame of reference for the speaker's talk.<sup>3</sup>

Second, our speakers create learning opportunities for students outside our courses who are also invited to attend the talks we organize. Our events are open to the respective campus communities and, as the popularity of our events has grown, so has attendance. For example, most of the students attending Reiff Center events are actually not enrolled in Francesca's classes.<sup>4</sup> The Reiff Center makes an effort to reach out to professors who are teaching classes for which talks could be relevant, as well as to student groups that might be interested in the topic. Once a list of such professors and student groups is compiled, students working at the center divide up the work of contacting each professor and group. Given that most campuses are flooded with invitations for talks and events, this personal connection helps cut through a lot of the noise and vastly increases the chance of someone responding to an invitation.

Third, our speakers expose students to human rights from other academic disciplines. We ourselves are political scientists and therefore teach human rights from a predominantly political science perspective. While many of our speakers are also political scientists, reflecting who we know, we have also hosted historians, anthropologists, and people from outside academia altogether. We connected with some of these speakers by engaging with colleagues in other departments who sometimes suggest people to bring, while other speakers reached out to us directly to offer to speak. Bringing in scholars from other disciplines creates a broader perspective for students, showing them what kinds of topics in other disciplines intersect with human rights, and exposing them to how different disciplines might think about tackling some of these issues.

Fourth, we teach the students working in the International Justice Lab and the Reiff Center, respectively. Both the lab and the center engage students in research, including teaching students about data

collection, thinking through ideas, and parsing difficult texts. The International Justice Lab’s model also includes opportunities for students to become coauthors on new research projects (Zvobgo 2022; Zvobgo et al., 2023). Through connections on the Reiff Center’s advisory board – itself a network of senior scholars from multiple disciplines and universities – Reiff Center students have been engaged in building content for a companion website for a new human rights textbook. These are valuable work experiences that students can highlight in their resumes and draw upon if they decide to pursue advanced academic degrees.

Finally, our network has created teaching opportunities for us at other institutions. For example, the International Justice Lab’s fifth anniversary panel in September 2023 connected Francesca with a professor at W&M’s law school who also teaches human rights. She subsequently invited Francesca to give a lecture in her class on the Inter-American system of human rights in March 2024, with plans for this to be a recurring lecture. For her part, Kelebogile has traveled to other universities to teach and provide mentorship to students in other labs and help get new labs started. These additional teaching opportunities are especially valuable at teaching-oriented institutions like ours.

## **Mentorship**

Our network also contributes to mentorship, both of students in the lab and center and on our campuses more generally. To start, we model for students how to network, a skill they are expected to know by the time they graduate and enter the working world but that they are not always trained to do. At both W&M and CNU, we use our speaker series for this purpose. When speakers visit our respective campuses, we ask them to have an informal meeting with students over coffee or a meal that we also attend. We have speakers briefly introduce themselves and their work, then we have students do the same. In effect, students practice with us what they will one day have to do without us. Sometimes, students will be too modest or will, because of nerves, forget some part of their academic biography and experience. In these moments, we gently intervene and encourage them to elaborate on an idea or experience they have had. Over time, students learn to fully and confidently give their “elevator pitch.” That our colleagues, who have traveled from near and far, take a genuine interest in our students builds their confidence, showing them that their

voices and ideas matter, including to those people whose scholarly works they have studied. Many of our visitors have commented on how impressed they are by our students and their professionalism.

In terms of the substance of students' engagements with guest speakers, students are exposed to human rights from more professions than our own. Our speakers have included people working in diverse non-academic fields – journalism, law, public service, and activism, among others. Given that most students will work outside the academy, and we are not always able to advise them on how to prepare for X or Y job (we have only really had one ourselves), guest speakers' perspectives and advice are invaluable. And so, too, are their contacts. A number of our students have gotten jobs with or because of speakers they met.

Relatedly, through informal and formal discussions with speakers, students learn about diverse academic and professional journeys. Perhaps one of the most important lessons different speakers have shared is that there does not have to be a single path to a career. One speaker worked in hospitality and then communications and is now an author. Another worked in the nonprofit sector before deciding to study it. And yet another went from being a practicing lawyer to an academic. There are many possible paths. But without meeting and hearing from someone who has walked a different path, students get tunnel vision and assume that everyone takes the same route to a profession. Many students are reassured that there are multiple paths to the same job, so they do not need to be so concerned about choosing the “right” one.

Many of our students – and we do not believe their experience is unique – face a great deal of job-related anxiety. Consequently, anything big or small we can do, like working with them on research or coaching personal introductions over coffee, we want to do. We also have developed resource pages on our respective organizational websites that include information about career pathways that we have crowdsourced from our growing network.<sup>5</sup> These resources are publicly available to all.

## **Service**

Finally, our network has provided many opportunities for us to engage in service to our institutions and to the discipline more broadly. To begin, our collaboration provides a service to our respective institutions by bringing external speakers to campus. Because we share the costs of each speaker, we can bring many more

people to each school than we otherwise would. Moreover, we serve as mentors to the students who work at our lab and center, including by providing career advice and writing letters of recommendation. Additionally, our collaboration serves the other's institution, not just our own. For example, the Reiff Center had fewer restrictions on money than W&M did coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and so provided many of the speakers for W&M's government department colloquium, as the speakers were already in town to speak at the Reiff Center and the International Justice Lab.<sup>6</sup>

Next, we have been able to together provide service to the discipline. Tangibly, we co-edited the 2025 special issue of the *International Journal of Transitional Justice*. Further, our work has shown others how to meaningfully engage undergraduates in research. This is not something that was taught to us at our Ph.D. institutions, which are major research universities, nor is it typically discussed as a skill that one should learn in graduate school (Becker et al., 2021). Our work has provided others a model for how to operate a lab or center. We have been very open to serving as a sounding board to anyone wishing to pursue a similar endeavor, especially if they are in departments or are at institutions that do not have graduate students.

More intangibly, our collaboration has provided opportunities to amplify voices and topics that are not always heard from or about. It has been important for us to have a mix of established and emerging voices, and several of the latter group received their Ph.D. degrees around the same time that we did. Having two external talks on a CV in one year sends a strong signal to the discipline about the scholar's importance to the field. The talks are aimed at undergraduates and do not involve circulation of papers, which allows scholars the opportunity to present new ideas without having them fully written out. Moreover, our talks feature topics that do not often appear as subject matter in research colloquia. For example, we have had talks about disability rights in cities, femicide in Latin America, and anthropolitics.

### **Challenges and Limitations – and Solutions**

It can be difficult to establish a lab or a robust events program where the infrastructure does not exist. We have been very fortunate: the Reiff Center already existed (albeit without a director) and so did the Global

Research Institute, where the International Justice Lab is based. We have benefited tremendously from current and former lab and center directors, not just at our current institutions but also in graduate school and in the broader profession. This is built into the Reiff Center's advisory board, which Francesca reconstituted in 2023 to include academics at other institutions who direct similar kinds of centers. An entire consortium of human rights centers exists across the U.S. that can help center directors build community.<sup>7</sup> While a similar consortium does not (yet) exist for research labs, Becker et al. (2021) and Zvobgo (2022) provide lab how-to's that may be helpful for colleagues contemplating starting their own.

Even with an existing infrastructure, starting something new is always a weighty task and there are start-up costs to pay, like creating contact lists and developing outreach plans. A given faculty member has to take on a lot of this initial work themselves. While one can consult with people who have done similar things, it is ultimately up to the individual faculty member to get something started. Again, we recommend collaborating with others, at one's own institutions and in the surrounding area. Geographic proximity has helped us a lot. It is also much easier to partner with other institutions when one already knows someone there. A prior relationship from graduate school helped us, but reaching out to scholars at nearby institutions can work well, too. The solicitation need not be initially for a shared speaker series. Rather, one could reach out about joining a panel at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association and International Studies Association, to see if there is a connection worth building.

In terms of funding, we are unusually well-resourced at our universities, but there are ways to economize. One idea is to take advantage of an upcoming homecoming or alumni weekend. The International Justice Lab's first speaker was an alumnus Kelebogile had connected with via email not long before he came to W&M. A former prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Arthur Traldi was the perfect person to inaugurate the lab's speaker series. He covered his own expenses since he was already coming for homecoming, which was both generous and very much appreciated, as Kelebogile was still a graduate student at the time.

Another idea is to bring in colleagues from local universities, who would not need flights to be purchased or a hotel room to be booked. Only having to cover costs for driving or taking the train makes a



speaker series much more feasible for people in departments or universities with fewer available resources. For instance, we have brought in people from Georgetown and American University whose train tickets from Washington, D.C. were a fraction of the cost of a flight.

Yet another idea is cost-sharing with one's department and units across campus. The Reiff Center frequently partners with other departments like History and programs like Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies to co-host speakers. The International Justice Lab has done likewise with the W&M government department. Talk series can even be organized completely internally, with colleagues from different disciplines who work on similar issues presenting. This has the added benefit of showing students how scholars in different disciplines and with different ontological, epistemological, and methodological backgrounds approach related topics.

With the popularization of video conferencing tools such as Zoom in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual talks and webinars are increasingly common and take costly travel out of the equation altogether. Hybrid models are an option, too. The Reiff Center has occasionally brought in speakers via Zoom, with all of the audience members in the same room. There are many possibilities. The important thing is to have an open mind and think creatively.

Perhaps the great challenge of networks is starting them and, once started, maintaining them. We suggest to readers that when you meet someone you want to connect with at a conference or through talks, send an email. Many of our coauthor relationships have been forged through shared conference panels or visits by speakers to our institutions. Personal connections are the glue that holds networks together. Importantly, if you have an idea for something, make sure to see it through. We understand that people get busy and balls sometimes get dropped, but we cannot overstate the importance of establishing a reputation for hard work, consistency, dedication, and results. These are essential qualities that partners must have to build networks that last.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> Our deep gratitude to Laia Balcells, Chad Clay, Courtney Hillebrecht, Cyanne Loyle, Monika Nalepa, and Emily Ritter.

<sup>3</sup> This included the first chapters of Hillebrecht (2021) and Reiners (2021).

<sup>4</sup> CNU also has incentives for students to attend talks, as students enrolled in Honors and the President's Leadership Program are required to attend a certain number each semester.

<sup>5</sup> Visit [internationaljusticelab.org/teaching](https://internationaljusticelab.org/teaching) and [cnu.edu/reiffcenter/resources](https://cnu.edu/reiffcenter/resources) for more information.

<sup>6</sup> This is because the Reiff Center operates from an endowment and does not use state funds.

<sup>7</sup> This is the Consortium of Higher Education Centers for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Studies.

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