

# Supporting Displaced and Refugee Students in Higher Education: Principles and Best Practices

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## Foreword

By Allan E. Goodman

Conflict, war and the effects of climate change have and will continue to displace millions of people around the globe, including university and college students. In times of peace, these students become their societies' future leaders, but in times of war, they may become a lost generation.

Higher education in the United States has a long tradition of providing support to and sanctuary for the world's students. However, the nature and enormity of human displacement in our era is such that America's universities and colleges are facing a new and unique challenge.

*The Principles* reaffirm American higher education's commitment to defending the Human Right to Education. It signals our collective readiness to help address the needs of displaced and refugee university and college students; cooperate with governments, the United Nations, and educational non-governmental organizations to identify and support qualified students; and help rebuild institutions of higher education in the face of conflict and disaster.

*The Practices* is a living document, which outlines sustainable approaches to the practical challenges of identifying and admitting qualified students; providing them with appropriate legal support; meeting their social, psychological, and emotional needs; and supporting their academic and career goals, as international students and victims of war and displacement. Their development was prompted by the current humanitarian crisis in higher education caused by the war in Syria. Our goal here is to learn from our work with displaced and refugee Syrian students, and apply it globally. These practices will grow and be refined as more universities develop expertise in the best, most effective ways to incorporate displaced and refugee students into their campus communities.

As international educators, we know that displaced and refugee students bring with them a host of experiences that demonstrate human resilience, while adding to campus diversity in substantial and meaningful ways. We ask that your institution join the growing list of American colleges and universities

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that have embraced these principles, and have committed to making displaced and refugee students part of their campus communities.

**Allan Goodman**

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University of California, Davis

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## Preface

By Andrea Stanton

The chapters for this e-book came from a lively and timely set of presentations made during the “Project No More Lost Generation: Principles of Higher Education Support for Displaced and Refugee Students” workshop, which was held as part of the Institute of International Education’s 2016 “Best Practices in Internationalizing the Campus” Conference. This pre-conference event brought together a targeted group of practitioners, scholars, and other higher education stakeholders, to reflect on their current experiences with Syrian displaced and refugee students, and to discuss the role that American institutions of higher education can and should play in the current Syria crisis and in future conflict situations. Edited versions of the presentations made during this workshop are now available in this e-book, in order to reach as many higher education stakeholders as possible, and give them the tools to successfully and cost-effectively be part of the national movement to support Syrian and other conflict-area undergraduate and graduate students.

This e-book begins with a summary of the findings of the first three “No More Lost Generation” research reports, which were conducted in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey by an IIE-led team of scholars and researchers. Adrienne Fricke, one of the reports’ lead authors and a consultant with Physicians for Human Rights, noted that pre-conflict Syria had high levels of participation in tertiary or higher education, and that these students face an educational crisis even more acute than that of K-12 students, since they are the generation most immediately likely to be called upon to rebuild a post-conflict Syria. As she notes, they represent Syria’s human capital, with approximately 30% of externally displaced and refugee Syrians of university age. Most are acutely aware of the importance of completing their studies, as evidenced from interviews with university-age Syrians in Zaatari Camp in Jordan, outside Beirut in Lebanon, and in Gaziantep and Reyhanli in Turkey. Without the opportunity to complete their degrees, this generation risks becoming an underclass, ill-equipped to help re-build Syria or start productive lives elsewhere.

Fricke notes that Syrian university students face five primary challenges when attempting to find new academic homes in the region or overseas. First, they often lack documentation or credentials indicating courses taken and grades earned. The Assad government generally requires them to return to their

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home universities in person to obtain transcripts, leaving them vulnerable to arrest, conscription, detention, or conflict violence. Second, they often lack access to information about scholarship or other programs that could assist them in finding, applying, and matriculating to a new university. Third, they may experience difficulty with the language of instruction in some universities: Syrians fluent in French, English, or Turkish may still need to learn the vocabulary required for a business or engineering course, as well as the standard conventions of academic writing in the new language. Fourth, they may face a combination of discrimination in their receiving country – particularly acute in Lebanon and parts of Turkey, as well as parts of Europe, which can make local universities less hospitable for Syrian students. Finally, they face high expenses, including the need to support families. University-age Syrians interviewed in Lebanon and Turkey expressed a strong desire to finish their studies, but noted that they needed to continue working as taxi drivers, cashiers, or in other low-paying jobs in order to support parents or other relatives. Studying full time would create a double expense: the cost of tuition and fees, as well as the lost income from their current job. While some of these challenges are more difficult to address than others, American institutions of higher education are particularly well equipped to address the first three.

The next two sections of this e-book address the questions of how American institutions of higher education can successfully and cost-effectively assist Syrian students today, and by extension victims of future conflicts. Keith Watenpugh, Professor and Director of Human Rights Studies at the University of California, Davis, addressed the important role that American higher education can and must play in helping ameliorate the tremendous crisis engendered by cutting off the educational opportunities of undergraduate and graduate students in conflict areas. He argued that this role is part of these institutions' larger mission as educators, and one that American institutions of higher education have played since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In order to articulate the role for American higher education, Professor Watenpugh oversaw the drafting of a set of five principles to guide US colleges and universities. These principles were drafted at a two-day workshop held at the University of California, Davis in December 2015, bringing together scholars on Syria and human rights, university admissions and administrative personnel, legal experts, and community representatives, to give words to the crucial role of American higher education in providing safe havens to students from conflict areas. The five principles include the reaffirmation of the Human Right to Education as established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the critical need

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to empower young people affected by conflict through access to higher education; higher education's particular responsibility to protect and support women, disabled, and minority students of various kinds; the importance of preparing these students to return home and rebuild their societies once the conflict ends; and the importance of developing partnerships with institutions of higher education in refugee receiving countries and in safe regions of the conflict area, to provide local opportunities for displaced and refugee students and help rebuild local higher education when conflict subsides. None of these principles, as Watenpaugh noted, charted a new role for American higher education. Instead, they simply articulate and reaffirm its historic role in supporting students affected by war and conflict in the past.

Turning from the conceptual to the practical, Andrea Stanton, board member for the Syrian Studies Association and assistant professor at the University of Denver addressed the questions of how American institutions of higher education can help displaced and refugee students in an effective and cost-effective manner. Thanks to the internationalization focus of many American universities, most today are well prepared to handle the logistical and administrative challenges that integrating displaced and refugee students might pose. Any institution of higher education that already enrolls, matriculates, and supports international students is well equipped to do the same with displaced and refugee students. At most, institutions will need to adjust their processes – but not to lower their standards. Institutions are encouraged to turn first to their staff in admissions, student life, academic advising, international student services, and similar offices. These staff members are experts at identifying and resolving challenges related to international students, and informal surveys suggest that most are eager to leverage this expertise and put their knowledge to work in supporting displaced and refugee students.

In order to support American institutions of higher education in developing processes to enroll, matriculate, and support displaced and refugee students, the December 2015 working group also drafted a set of best practices. These best practices, which emphasize that US universities and colleges already have the experience and expertise to successfully and cost-effectively welcome displaced and refugee students, are listed in this chapter.

The second half of this e-book focuses on lessons learned and best practices that have emerged from four institutions with substantive experience in integrating Syrian refugees into their student bodies:



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Bard College, the University of Evansville, the Illinois Institute of Technology, and Monmouth College. They offer four distinct case studies: different locations and institutional foci, but with a common commitment to welcoming displaced and refugee students in ways that have been both cost-effective and supportive of the institution's individual mission. This section will be most useful for school administrators looking for real-world examples of how to recruit, matriculate, support, and graduate displaced and refugee students on a limited budget, and by leveraging existing staff, administrator, and faculty expertise.

The authors of these chapters see this book as the start of an ongoing, national conversation between college and university staff, administrators, and faculty looking to make a difference in the lives of displaced and refugee students. The contributors welcome comments and questions from readers, and look forward to working collaboratively to help support students in need.

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## Regional Opportunities and Challenges for Syrian Students

By Adrienne Fricke

Much has been written about the Syria crisis, and especially the effect of the massive migration into surrounding countries as conditions inside the country have continued to deteriorate. Yet the way forward for the displaced remains underexplored. In particular, relatively little has been written about the ability of this group to access higher education in a way that would allow them to support the economic and social needs of their own communities, potentially enrich the societies now hosting them, and rebuild post conflict.

A joint research initiative of the Institute of International Education and the UC Davis Human Rights Initiative have assessed trends for higher education opportunities for Syrian refugees, as well as the many related challenges. The initiative has produced policy recommendations, which are set out in reports on the situation faced by Syrian youth in three countries that have received large numbers of refugees.<sup>1</sup> The research focused on Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, which are coping with the largest unplanned population transfer since World War Two. According to UN estimates, one in five people in Jordan is Syrian, as is one in four in Lebanon. While Turkey is much larger geographically than either Jordan or Lebanon, certain areas have been greatly affected. In the southeast, the formerly small border town of Reyhanli has increased in population by tens of thousands. In Istanbul, hundreds of thousands of Syrians live in sprawling poor suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

The implications of this shift in population are significant. The latest UN data illustrate two important trends that inform any approach to providing services to this population.<sup>3</sup> First, the vast majority of

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<sup>1</sup> Watenpugh, K. D. et al., "We Will Stop Here and Go No Further: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey," (October 2014); "The War Follows Them: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon," (June 2014); "Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria's Refugee University Students and Academics in Jordan," (May 2013). University of California-Davis and the Institute of International Education.

<sup>2</sup> "Istanbul has more Syrian refugees than all of Europe says David Miliband," October 27, 2015, *The Guardian*, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/27/istanbul-has-more-syrian-refugees-than-all-of-europe-says-david-miliband>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Interagency Information Sharing Portal, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, last accessed April 15, 2016.

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*registered* refugees — almost always a smaller number than the displaced population — live outside of camps, which means it can be difficult to find out what they need and deliver services to them. Although they are often called “urban” refugees, they may live in rural or outside urban settings, which can be especially hard to access. Second, the number of men and women refugees is now roughly equal, meaning that unlike the earlier years of the conflict, when the refugee population was made up primarily of women and children, men are now joining them. This may be an indication to the international community that Syrians are not planning to return in the near future, however much they may hope to do so in the long term.

Despite the many differences in the situation Syrian students face in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, there are five broad categories of universal problems: lack of documentation and credentials; lack of access to information; difficulty with the language of academic instruction; discrimination; and expenses, including tuition and living costs.

### **Lack of Documentation and Credentials**

Proper documentation is critical for entering educational programs. Many displaced people lack the papers required to prove legal residency to enable them to access public education; they also lack official transcripts and certified copies of degrees, regular requirements for matriculation. While registrars in both the US and the EU have begun thinking hard about potential ways to establish the credentials of displaced Syrians, many challenges remain.

Integration into the secondary school system is key for establish a pipeline of qualified applicants to university; in the long term, this is as important as the availability of higher education opportunities. A recent study found that in Lebanon, youth face almost insurmountable barriers to accessing secondary education, with only 11% of those surveyed enrolled in formal schooling.<sup>4</sup> Choices regarding secondary schooling can be political as well as practical. In Turkey, the Syrian Interim Government-in-exile offers a “corrected” Syrian curriculum and a terminal exam, based on instruction in Arabic language schools run by Syrians. The exit exam is clearly affiliated with the Syrian opposition, and is hard to translate into a foreign credential. The only country that has recognized its validity is Libya. As an American credentialing official explained, “I just don’t know what to do with this degree.” Yet without tailored transitional programs for entering local high schools, few Syrian students have other options.

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<sup>4</sup> “A Future in the Balance: Lebanon,” Norwegian Refugee Council (April 2016)

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## Information Access

Access to information in general, and academic opportunities in particular, can be difficult for displaced people living outside of refugee camps—as is the case for at least 70% of Syrian refugees.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the UNHCR indicates that 90% of registered Syrian refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey reside outside of camps.<sup>6</sup> While social media can disperse information quickly, on the ground support services are still required to assist displaced students in navigating an application process, especially when it takes place in a foreign language.

## Language of Instruction

Syria has long embraced public instruction in Arabic except for certain scientific and literary courses. Even the most qualified Syrian students may be hindered by their lack of language abilities. Educational frameworks developed out of different British and French colonial systems in Jordan and Lebanon, each with their own particular features. Turkey's academic system is the product of the distinctive Ottoman bureaucracy, in which central government regulations may be interpreted to varying degrees in each of the provinces. Many institutions of higher learning (and the more competitive secondary schools) teach in either English or French in Jordan and Lebanon. Turkish is a difficult and grammatically different than Arabic, despite having some loan words; in order to enter university, high scores on the national test of Turkish language, the TOMER, must be achieved, requiring extensive study for most applicants.

## Discrimination

In the face of such a large influx of people, and rising security concerns related to acts of terrorism, official and unofficial anti-Syrian sentiment has grown. To some extent, aid given to assist Syrians and other displaced people must be structured thoughtfully to benefit the populations hosting them; this will be even more important in the higher education sphere, since universities provide an important platform for sharing ideas, tolerance, citizenship and social integration. The donor community and governments must work hard to change the language of altruism into one of enrichment, and to help populations see the opportunity in exigency.

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<sup>5</sup> "Istanbul has more Syrian refugees than all of Europe says David Miliband," *The Guardian* (October 27, 2015), available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/27/istanbul-has-more-syrian-refugees-than-all-of-europe-says-david-miliband>.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Syria Regional Refugee Response Interagency Information Sharing Portal, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (last accessed April 21, 2016).

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## **Expenses**

Scholarships are being disbursed by various universities, governments, and foundations. Not only does the number of qualified applicants in need greatly exceed the demand, but in many ways the fees are the least difficult part of the equation. Donors are struggling to address the many costs beyond tuition—books and transportation, as well as stipends for a student’s contribution to their family’s expenses. The intricacy of domestic and sometimes municipal or neighborhood politics can make the distribution of services and funds challenging, and the process for evaluating students is labor intensive. Yet reaching Syrian students is worth the investment of time and energy.

## **Conclusion**

While there are no easy solutions for how to implement a resolution to the Syrian conflict, as long as smart young Syrians are motivated to study, there is room for hope. In a Syrian-run high school in suburban Istanbul, a teenaged girl who hopes to study embryology in Europe asked, “Do you think we will ever get our lives back? I responded with conviction that I did not realize I had, saying, “I do not know what will happen in the future. But I do know that a person does not have to be cured to be healed.” With hope for a future through learning, an entire generation of Syrians may begin to heal.

*Adrienne Fricke is a Visiting Scientist at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.*

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## **Principles for the Protection and Support of Refugee University Students: A Global Imperative and the Definitive Challenge to the Human Right to Education**

By Keith David Watenpaugh

Three years ago, near the center of the vast Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan, I sat under a giant tent and at a table with young Syrians who had fled the war in their homeland. This would be just the first of several such meetings I've had since, not just in Jordan, but later in Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and the US with refugee students. These early meetings were full of optimism, even occasional laughter as the students told us of how they hoped to find a place to resume their studies in anticipation of their return to Syria.

It was easier to imagine returning to Syria in those early days of the war, before the destruction of Homs and Palmyra, the sieges of Yarmouk and Madaya, and the battle for Aleppo; before the establishment of the Islamic State and before the spread of elements of the war to Iraq and Turkey. The pressing reality of that elapse of time is the recognition that many, if not most of the young people displaced beyond the borders of Syria now, will remain outside their home countries for an average of 17 years. In that population are hundreds of thousands of young college students — up to 30% of all young refugees.

The mounting loss of human potential is immense, and the dangers of allowing this group to be a lost generation are many. Most important, they are the only viable tool for a peaceful transition of an emerging Syrian diaspora into life in permanent exile.

American higher education — from its great universities, liberal arts institutions to community colleges — can and must play a role in addressing that reality of permanent exile by working through multiple means to aid in the reconnection of young refugees to education. Doing so, we also defend the basic human right to education, and lay the foundations for addressing this and the other refugee crises that will surely follow. There is no reason to expect that the Syrians will be the only great refugee flow of our time. The last estimate by the UN of the global displaced and refugee population puts the number at close to 65 million — about the population of France. If that number grows at just 2% per year, within 35 years, our planet will be home, if you will, to 130 million refugees. I hope that number is wrong, but I suspect it is merely too low.

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But there are also real obstacles to a meaningful embrace of higher education's role – obstacles cultural, institutional and political – that are difficult to overcome, all the more so in a climate of high tuition, decreasing state support, student debt, and the rise of a global far-right that views refugees as a political and social threat, including in the sphere of education.

This reality demands that we engage in a broader conversation not just about how to best use the talents of our faculty, the dedication of our staff and the resources of our campuses to address this problem, but understand how and why it must be part of our larger mission as educators.

Over the last year, and following a series of conferences and workshops, colleagues of mine who have conducted research throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations like the IIE, the US Department of State; leaders of diaspora groups; and refugees themselves have started that conversation and arrived at a set of five basic principles that we hope can guide a global response.

Below is a working draft of those *Principles*, which I propose on behalf of my collaborators here not as an end, but rather as a point of departure into an ongoing dialog on higher education's role in aiding refugee students and endangered higher education.

- 1) We reaffirm the Human Right to Education as established in [Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and believe that this right imposes a unique responsibility on American institutions of higher learning to adopt a position of national leadership in protecting and supporting, to the extent possible, higher education for qualified displaced and refugee students.
- 2) We recognize the critical need to empower young people affected by war and conflict, and higher education's unique role and responsibility to uphold human dignity, foster democratic and pluralistic values, and build the social bases for lasting and sustainable peace.
- 3) We acknowledge that our collective responsibility to protect and support extends to all students, but we must make special efforts to promote access to higher education for

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refugee and displaced women; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; and disabled students, as well as those who have faced discrimination or persecution as members of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities, or for their political opinions.

- 4) We will prepare displaced and refugee students to return home after conflict and rebuild their societies. We will assist those who cannot return home to become productive citizens of the United States and contribute to the diversity and excellence of American society.
- 5) We will build partnerships with institutions of higher education in states neighboring conflict areas, and where possible within conflict areas, to assist with educational programs, secure academic freedom, build capacity to absorb displaced and refugee students, and help rebuild higher education when circumstances permit.

For the drafters of *The Principles*, do not represent an innovation in the global role of America's institutions of higher learning, but rather as an affirmation of the historic position our institutions have played following wars and revolutions in the past.

*Keith David Watenpaugh is Professor and Director of Human Rights Studies at UC Davis. He is a leading historian of Human Rights and humanitarianism. Since 2013 he has led the joint UC Davis-IIE No More Lost Generations Project on conditions facing refugee university students and scholars.*



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## Best Practices: Making Use of Existing University Resources to Welcome and Integrate Refugee Students

By Andrea Stanton

Syrian students in higher education today present the most visible and most compelling case of civilians suffering the devastating loss of their access to their studies. Syria's tertiary education sector was historically robust, offering tuition-free enrollment for students. Almost 200,000 students were enrolled in the state university system at any one time by the early 2000s, with private universities opened in the mid-2000s adding another 10,000 university spots. UNESCO statistics indicate that in 2011, the first year of the war, 26.2% of the official school-age population was enrolled in some form of tertiary education.<sup>7</sup> Students forced to flee their homes, whether as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees in other countries, have been largely cut off from access to higher education or any educational opportunities.

Even today, young Syrians continue to prize higher education, and are actively seeking ways to access it. A 2015 Mercy Corps survey cited by *The Economist*<sup>8</sup> indicates that in northern Syria, most teenagers ranked education as a priority, even above health. Yet students still residing in Syria often face difficulty in getting to classes at their universities, and in many cases classes are held irregularly.

Syria's young people may be the most valuable remaining asset — human capital — of a once-vibrant country. The United Nations estimates the average displacement crisis lasts for seventeen years,<sup>9</sup> and the Syrian crisis may last longer due to deep instability among a wide array of non-state armed groups. Although the UNHCR does not collect information on student status during registration, the UNOCHA has collected this data in sample surveys conducted in Greece, which hosted a wave of Syrians hoping to reach Europe in 2015 and the first quarter of 2016. According to the UN, 56,000 people traveled by boat

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Syrian Arab Republic, available at <http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/country-profile.aspx?code=SYR&regioncode=40525>

<sup>8</sup> Data Team, "Teens in Syria," *The Economist*, (August 19, 2015), available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/08/daily-chart-6>; see also Mercy Corps, "Adolescents inside Syria: No One Hears Us," (January 2015) available at <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/adolescents-inside-syria-no-one-hears-us>

<sup>9</sup> Standing Committee on Protracted Refugee Situations, *Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme*, EC/54/SC/CRP.14, (June 10, 2004), available at <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4a54bc00d.pdf>

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across the Mediterranean to Greece in February 2016; Syrians make up nearly half of these arrivals. A February 2016 UN survey found 27% of Syrian respondents were students, and 73% reported that they had interrupted their studies to flee Syria.<sup>10</sup>

The higher education community worldwide and in the U.S. is increasingly confronted with the questions of how to assist displaced students and offer them a safe haven to continue their studies. Answering the question “how can we help?” is often not an issue of university administrator or faculty will, but of a combination of not knowing what resources are already available on campus, a sense of helplessness in the face of such a large number of students needing assistance, and an understandable fiscal caution.

What developing our list of best practices has shown is that for most universities, considerable resources already exist on campus. Similarly, while no one university can ameliorate a global refugee crisis, admitting 5-20 students per year can make a meaningful contribution to the lives of those students and their families, as well as enriching the campus environment and fulfilling the university’s mission to educate, serve the public good, etc. Finally, given the tuition dependence that most universities in the U.S. today face, public or private, our hope is that these best practices highlight the minimal additional cost in terms of staff expertise or hours that welcoming displaced and refugee students will entail.

Best practices are intended to answer concerns and questions like “this sounds important, but I have no idea how to make it happen”, “how hard will this be?” and “how much will it cost?” Taking these questions seriously and answering them practically will help enable universities to institutionalize the integration of displaced and refugee students, so that the process does not start from scratch each time a new refugee crisis erupts in the world.

### **Key Points**

Most universities are better prepared to handle displaced and refugee students than administrators, faculty, or staff may initially assume. Any university that already supports international students is

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<sup>10</sup> Profiling of Syrian Arrivals on Greek Islands in February 2016, UNHCR, *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean*, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

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already ready to welcome displaced and refugee students with minimal adjustments and with a high probability of success.

The best option for most universities interested in welcoming displaced and refugee students is to adjust their processes, not lower their standards. No university should be expected to admit students who are unable to successfully complete coursework; this does neither the university nor the student any service. What we encourage is for universities to identify alternate means of credentialing students without formal university transcripts, and to apply the standards for admission already used for international students matriculating at that university to this community. Here we can include a link to the WES webinar on credential evaluation for Syrian students

When asked what would be required for their particular unit to be able to admit, educate, or support displaced and refugee students, university staff (in admissions, student life, academic advising, or international student services, for example) often respond positively. Rather than focusing on the difficulties of adjusting processes, they evince willingness to make existing processes and procedures work for displaced and refugee students. They are an invaluable resource on where potential pain points may be located, as well as how to minimize them, and they are often eager to leverage their expertise to support incoming students.

Faculty members who work on or come from the region in conflict can serve as valuable resources for background knowledge about the region, including about the higher education system(s) there. They may be willing to provide trainings for university faculty and staff, and/or to serve as mentors for incoming students.

Universities need to identify which potential sub-set of students might best fit their mission and expertise. Liberal arts colleges with a strong focus on undergraduate education and individual development may be best placed to welcome undergraduate students. Public universities may be better positioned to welcome MA, MS, and PhD students, in part because of local pressures to keep undergraduate seats and tuition discounts for in-state students. Universities with strong programs in particular areas – international development, agricultural sciences, business, etc. – may wish to create cohorts of students in those programs, to maximize peer support, rather than admitting the same number of students across a number of university programs.

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Finally, it is important for universities working with displaced and refugee students to have and communicate a clear understanding of these key terms. “Refugee” is a term often used colloquially to refer to anyone displaced in conflict. However, in terms of university admissions, it is important to remember that very few students are likely to apply for admission as officially registered and re-settled refugees. Those who do may be invisible to within the admissions system, as they will likely be categorized with US citizens and green card holders. Generally, the students that universities work with will enter the country on F1 or J1 visas, although they may indeed be displaced from their homes and may be registered refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It is important for administrative and public outreach purposes to be able to describe the life-altering disruptions that these students have faced, while also recognizing the legal distinctions between students who enter the United States as part of a State Department refugee resettlement program and those who enter on student visas.

*Andrea Stanton is Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Denver. She has a PhD in Middle East History and is also on the board of the Syrian Studies Association, with experience living and working in Damascus, Syria.*

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## **Bard College: Responding to Syrian Refugee Crisis in New York and Berlin**

By Jennifer Murray

Bard College is a small liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley region of NY State. The college enrolls just over 2000 undergraduates in New York, and also offers a Bard degree to students in Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Germany, and the West Bank through dual degree partnerships with universities in those locations. Bard also offers degrees to prison inmates who complete our curriculum through the Bard Prison Initiative and the college runs several high school/early college partnerships offering associate degrees to public high school students in Manhattan, Queens, Newark, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Baltimore, and Simon's Rock Early College in Great Barrington, MA. The College holds a variety of tuition exchange agreements across the globe. These partnerships and initiatives are made possible largely through a very strong institutional commitment to education as a necessary element of civil society, and a very high institutional tolerance for innovation and risk.

### **The Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis**

Bard joined the Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis in Spring 2014 with a commitment of full-tuition scholarships for up to two Syrian students for up to four years each. Bard has a history of offering refuge and safe haven to threatened scholars, most notably a group of Hungarian émigrés in 1956, and through the establishment in 1991 of a special scholarship program for students from then newly independent Eastern European nations, we have also acted as a host institution for the Scholar Rescue Fund - therefore, the call to accept displaced Syrian students was heard as an institutional fit.

### **Admissions Process**

The commitment had the full support of our president, Leon Botstein, as well as senior leadership in admissions and international affairs. Our selection committee consisted of the Director of Admissions, Dean of International Affairs, and Director of the Institute for International Liberal Education at Bard College. The first student Bard admitted as part of our commitment to the Consortium to aid Syrian Students was Sana Mustafa. Sana's father was kidnapped by the Assad regime while Sana was in the US as part of the Middle East Partnership Initiative program sponsored by the World Affairs Council. Her mother and sisters fled to Turkey with nothing, and where they have been living for the last two and a half years. None of the family has heard any news of their father in this time. Sana's younger sister, now

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16, has not attended school in the last two years. Due to the timing of these events at home, Sana was able to remain in the US and apply for political asylum, a status she was granted just months before enrolling at Bard College. We intend to enroll another student in fall 2016, but continue to face the obstacle of securing sufficient funds for non-tuition expenses.

### **Institutional Challenges**

One of the greatest challenges many students face is the inability to furnish educational records, either because of the circumstances of their departure from home, or the government or institution's refusal to provide records to students identified as activists. At Bard, we relied on the expertise of the Dean of International Studies, who has extensive experience in the Middle East including working with both high school and university students. A personal interview was helpful in understanding what a student's educational path was prior to the conflict, and what type of US institution would provide a good fit. Additionally, students who may have participated in scholarships or programs sponsored by foreign governments or international organizations had already been through a vetting process, which can offer a benchmark for understanding academic development and language skills. The development of online and blended learning platforms, to be delivered in camps, will provide a fresh credential to students who participate in course modules. Institutions in locations near large refugee populations are also well placed to provide a preparatory year to displaced students and a transcript to document successful academic work.

For Bard, the two obstacles that had to be overcome were financing the room and board for a student, and identifying students who would thrive on a rural, liberal arts campus. Many of the applicants we reviewed through the Syria Consortium expressed interest in large, urban universities that offered professional and technical training such as dentistry, accounting, and engineering. Sana's application reflected an interest in social entrepreneurship and international relations, the former is something many Bard students aspire to, and the latter is a major that is offered by the college. Sana had been a student at the Higher Institute of Business Administration in Damascus, however, her academic interests shifted following her father's detainment and family's flight to Turkey. Our admissions committee decided she had the highest likelihood of success and satisfaction with Bard's curriculum and institutional profile.

### **Integrating Syrian Students on Campus**

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Sana was initially welcomed to campus during transfer student orientation together with students from Bard's partner networks, including fellow Arabic speakers from the West Bank. The Program in International Education (PIE) brings students from Bard's partners to the United States for a semester of study. Special students, such as Sana, are often welcomed to campus with this cohort, rather than the entire entering class, as the orientation and programming is designed specifically for students who, if not for special scholarships and support, are less likely to have the opportunity and support for a semester in the United States. These "PIE" students were among her first friends, and through involvement with this program Sana was also introduced to important friends of the College who support, through personal involvement as well as limited scholarship funding, students from countries in crisis or transition.

### **Funding Syrian Students**

Senior leadership at Bard was in support of providing full tuition scholarship for the semesters required to complete the degree. This generous financial aid offer did not, however, extend to room, board, and associated fees. Because Sana had just been granted status as an asylee, she was eligible to apply for federal financial aid, which she received in the form of both grants and loans. In an effort to help Sana avoid additional loans, the Center for Civic Engagement at Bard included support for students like Sana in grant application and donor appeals. As a member of a special community of visiting students at Bard, Sana met some of the donors who have long supported the College's commitment to students at risk. After getting to know Sana, one of the donors who support the PIE program came forward and offered funds to Bard's Center for Civic Engagement, which were used to help offset some of Sana's room and board expenses last semester. Sana's friendship and warmth, as much as her individual plight, moved this special donor to go above and beyond in her support of Sana. In her second year at Bard, Sana was selected for a residence life position, which provided a reduction in her housing costs. I am pleased to be able to share that Sana was just recently awarded funds from IIE's Syria-Yemen Emergency Student Fund to help offset her living expenses in Manhattan this semester. Thank you from all of us at Bard.

### **Opportunities for Response Abroad**

[Bard College Berlin, A Liberal Arts University](#) is officially recognized as a private university by the Berlin Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science. Bard College is accredited through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (USA) and awards a BA degree to students completing Bard College Berlin's BA program in Humanities, the Arts and Social Thought or BA in Economics, Politics, and

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Social Thought under authority granted by the New York State Board of Education. The students, faculty, and senior leadership of Bard College Berlin have enacted a number of responses intended to have direct positive impact upon displaced university students and scholars and to the regular student body and visiting North American students wishing to develop a better academic understanding of the crisis and ability to respond with the tools of active global citizenship. Courses such as Migrant Cities: Lessons from the Urban Age, Digital Politics: Social Commitment and the Public Sphere, In Search of a History: Migration in Germany from WWII to the Present, Global Citizenship, and Participation, Deliberation, Democracy: Policy Analysis and Engagement all examine civic engagement, the notion of borders, governance and accountability, memorials, internet activism, and forms of migration and urban life. The College has developed a Program in International Education and Social Change, which will enroll the first small cohort of Syrian refugee students in fall 2016. Sana Mustafa's sister is among this first cohort in Berlin. Active community education on refugee issues is accomplished through annual conferences and lecture series. The student initiative "BCB Open Campus against Closed Borders" included social events, film screenings, language classes, and cafe nights open to displaced students in Berlin. The group also ran targeted donation drives for goods assembled into care packages delivered to those in need. A recent DAAD grant to BCB will allow for the project to be solidified and expanded through paid student positions. Bard College Berlin offers an engagement year to students from North America, who wish to study migration and displacement in the context of global citizenship, and to pursue internship opportunities directly related to current relief and empowerment efforts in Berlin. Finally, Bard College Berlin is working with other institutions to develop blended learning platforms for local and international delivery and convene a group of displaced Syrian scholars and researchers to develop educational strategies useful in conflict and post-conflict Syria.

### **Best Practices**

Strategies that we found critical to overcoming institutional obstacles were communication, flexibility, and stakeholder identification. Deliberate, regular, and widespread communication ensures that a diverse set of offices on campus is aware of the special nature of these students, and the institution's commitment to their success. This often meant that one of the administrators working with Sana would call ahead, or accompany Sana to other offices on campus to explain the nature of the program and lobby for solutions that fit with her unique needs. The College's involvement was also announced by the Vice President for International Affairs and mentioned in alumni publications.



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Key stakeholders can be identified from across the campus and at all levels of administration. Some questions to consider include:

- Who is usually interested in international students?
- Which offices support special scholarships, and are there funds, expertise, or external resources that could be applied to assist a Syrian student?
- Which faculty teaches conducts research on topics related to the Syrian civil war, or the myriad circumstances emerging from the crisis?
- Are there faculty or administrators who have lived and worked in Syria or the Middle East?
- Which departments are supporting students who have experienced trauma?
- Do the Arabic language faculty know about the institution's efforts, has their advice and assistance been solicited?
- Does the student need ESL support? Or general academic guidance on expectation in a US classroom?
- Which religious leaders on campus should the student be introduced to? What campus organizations seem like a logical fit?
- Who will be the student's faculty advisor and mentor? What additional networks does that person bring to the conversation?
- Is there an office on campus or a faculty member working with students who may be able to research and collect examples of free tools and programs already working on responses to the crisis?
- Is your greater community already responding in any way to the crisis? If so, how can you partner to leverage support for bringing a student to campus?
- Does your institution belong to networks or consortia of peer institutions through which resources can be pooled and shared, and collective responses organized?
- If your institution has overseas campuses, how can they be used as platforms for response, student preparation, and data collection?

While it is critical to consider the ways in which facilitating the enrollment of displaced Syrian students aligns with institutional mission, it is equally imperative to recognize that these students are here to learn and to heal and to continue living for themselves, their families, and a shared future for their country. We have learned to constantly consider the balance between the shared student and institutional interest in advocacy, with the need for students to have the privacy and freedom to live as a

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typical college student. Students from Syria may not wish to always be the voice of the conflict or crisis as it relates to classroom discussions and campus events. This concern echoes conversations around diversity and identity. Students must control when to engage as the representative of a particular population, whether it is refugee, victim, survivor, or based on race, religion, and nationality. Being from a place of conflict and crisis should not engender the expectation that the student will or should always be ready and willing to comment upon or represent an opinion in discussions of Syria, of exile or refuge, of Islam, of a Muslim identity, of xenophobia, of terrorism, or of war. One way that Sana has integrated on campus is as a peer counselor, or resident advisor, at her current residence hall. She is something of a big sister to visiting students who often simply need a sympathetic ear or quick access to program support and logistics. A campus job can be a normalizing experience where students can get to know others whose interest is in them as student-workers who can help accomplish the daily work of the office. This position has also helped to offset some of Sana's room and board expenses.

Related to the need for balance in how a student and the institution choose to represent the larger cause, it is incumbent upon those who work most closely with Syrian or displaced students to know what, if any, risks to their safety may exist in local communities or places they visit regularly, or among groups with an interest in muffling voices of dissent. Sana has chosen to use her story to raise awareness about the humanitarian situation in Syria and the need for the US to move more quickly to accept greater numbers of refugees. On campus, Sana spearheaded a workshop on using social media to advocate in a way that does not put the user at risk of negative attention from a regime seeking to silence voices of opposition. As a political studies major, Sana's has chosen to share her story and the perspective it gives her in her classes, here are some faculty comments:

"Sana's contributions in class invariably move the discussion in productive ways and her unique approach and experiences lends a valuable voice to the seminar as a whole."

"It was such a pleasure to have you in the course; you brought commitment, energy, and insight to the discussion and provided a unique perspective on the material. Your written responses were engaging, and your final presentation on the role of women in the Syrian revolution was both informative and deeply moving."

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In addition to bringing such a valuable perspective to class discussions, Sana has shared her story in a number of venues including: The National Press Club in Washington DC, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park NY, on our local National Public Radio station WAMC FM, and at two events at the United Nations, the Association of the United States of America members' day and an IIE panel on students in crisis. She advocates for a better, faster refugee resettlement system in the United States, and hopes to be reunited with her mother and sisters. A short film was made about Sana: <http://elitedaily.com/news/sanas-story-syrian-refugee-fights-reunite/1419734/>

*Jennifer Murray is the Director of the Institute of International Liberal Education at Bard College.*

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## Displaced Students Enriching the University of Evansville

By Wesley Millner

Within months of the tragic and heartfelt actions of young Mohamad Bouzizi in Tunisia, the University of Evansville began holding forums to better understand what would become known as the Arab Spring. Like most observers, we had no idea how these initial hopes for democratization and greater human rights throughout the region would devolve into protracted and devastating wars in Syria and beyond. We were horrified by the increasing plight, but nevertheless inspired by the subsequent courage of common individuals who attempted to address the needs of thousands and later millions of displaced persons. Many of those displaced souls were young, innovative students who were poised to begin or continue their college education. The University of Evansville has been incredibly fortunate recently to welcome 25 Syrians into our ranks and is eager to expand this significantly in the near future.

The University of Evansville, established in 1854, is a private university in southern Indiana with a full-time undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,200 (in addition to a number of graduate programs). Building on its traditional arts and sciences foundation, the university offers over 80 fields of study including accredited professional programs in engineering, business, health sciences, and education. Further, the institution prides itself on being globally-minded and is truly dedicated to greater internationalization. Indeed, 45 years ago, the university began operating a branch campus, Harlaxton College ([www.harlaxton.evansville.edu](http://www.harlaxton.evansville.edu)), in a 150-room manor house just north of London. From the beginning, this endeavor allowed us to attract students not only from Europe but also from the Middle East and North Africa. Over the past five years, we have expanded this outreach and have enjoyed much success in attracting additional international students to our Indiana campus, with well over 15% of our students coming from abroad. Currently, UE's diverse student body represents some 42 states and over 50 countries. The University also encourages students to study abroad, with more than 50% of our students studying abroad (including many international students) at some point during their degree program.

Notwithstanding our history with internationalization, we believe that any institution can have an enormous impact on the current Syrian crisis in higher education. Indeed, if we are to prevent a "lost generation" in Syria and the region, large numbers of universities throughout the US and abroad will

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need to be successfully engaged and supportive of these remarkable young students - the future engineers, teachers, doctors, scientists and social leaders who will be vital in rebuilding these societies.

### **Best Practices**

Most university faculty, staff and administrators are hard pressed not to support struggling, displaced students – at least theoretically. The difficulty comes when that support is at odds with other institutional demands, whether they be financial, administrative, or structural. From our perspective, intensive and creative collaboration not only with partners across campus, but well beyond the university gates is pivotal.

We have tied comprehensive internationalization to our mission, strategic plan and even accreditation. Our mission calls for providing students with life transforming educational experiences that prepare them to engage the world as informed, ethical, and productive citizens. Our strategic plan specifically requires the University to expand and enrich the university's international programs, including the increase in number and diversity of international students. In addition to embedding international/cultural diversity into our general education curriculum, we deliberately selected our Quality Initiative for the Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation to address the intersection of internationalization and social responsibility. This allowed us even greater incentive for the university community to consider taking on the challenge of displaced students.

While we have some potential institutional advantages, our relative success in attracting and supporting displaced students can certainly be replicated and indeed greatly expanded by a wide variety of colleges and universities throughout the country. Our intentionally modest size does allow us a relatively flat structure that is not overly burdened with bureaucracy. Having said that, our size does not connote large staffs, departments, or budgets that typically would be conducive to shouldering these additional responsibilities. For sustainable progress to be achieved, an institution needs a few dedicated advocate leaders, increasingly broad-based community buy-in, and the will to proceed deliberately and incrementally.

### **Admissions Process**

UE's Office of International Admissions was very moved and motivated to help these vulnerable students. We had previous experience in this part of the world, having participated in programs for Iraqi

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students as well as those from Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia. UE was one of the first groups of universities to travel to Iraq as some of these programs were initially launched. The Syrian situation, however, has involved much more flexibility as there has been little if any government aid per se for these students. Also, the timing of the Syrian crisis just as the world was slowly recovering from the global financial collapse further complicated the task of convincing administrators to take risks.

Most Syrian students naturally need enormous support across the spectrum of services. The obvious financial aid needs (many can only come on very high tuition scholarships) could be off-putting for those institutions that are flush with students or near capacity. Schools with enrollment flexibility, however, will find most displaced students incredibly driven and eager to succeed. Also, our affiliation with the Institute of International Education and specifically the Syria Consortium for Higher Education Crisis (<http://www.iie.org/Programs/Syria-Scholarships>) has been invaluable in providing support. The initial seed money allowed us to convince the highest levels of administration that recruiting and accommodating our Syrian students was not only the ethical choice to take, but also financially feasible and sustainable as long as the volume was prudently managed. Once increasing numbers of students matriculated, it became obvious that these students would be some of the hardest working, not only in the classroom but in all aspects of integration and community engagement.

The IIE Emergency Student Fund has provided supplemental funding for a number of our students, encouraging university administration to considering accepting additional Syrian students. For some of our existing Syrian students, this meant the difference between them continuing their studies and having to time-out on their degree trajectory. Further the non-governmental organization, Jusoor, has been very helpful in collaboration with IIE and also offering options such as the *100 Syrian Woman, 10,000 Syrian Lives Scholarships Program* (<http://jusoorsyria.com/100-syrian-women>) as well as scholarships throughout the UK (e.g., LSE, Cambridge, Oxford, etc.) and Lebanon.

As the university moved from just a few students to double digits, faculty and staff began to know more and more of these students and better understand the financial needs. Students even with robust scholarships consistently carry account balances (e.g., tuition, housing, university fees, etc.), so having cooperative and creative student account directors and registrars is vital. Many institutions require that students not have large account balances before a student registers and attends classes. This can be for fiscal reasons as well as insurance requirements. When faced with a few students who were waiting for

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money transfers and other financial arrangements, we developed a temporary waiver that would allow these students to initially register and attend classes from the beginning of the term, thereby not falling behind in their studies. Many university employees and community members also approached student accounts and made payments for individual students in order to maintain their matriculation. Further, the university in 2013 moved beyond its existing endowed scholarship funds for international students and inaugurated a specific scholarship fund for displaced Syrian students. Reaching out to board of trustees and other community members who increasingly know these students can bolster these scholarship opportunities. Like most aspects of development, however, this can be a very slow process.

A universal challenge for universities in the US is how best to integrate (rather than assimilate) international students into the academic and student life fabric of the institution. This is true for flagship state universities as well as smaller, private colleges. Our position somewhere in between might provide instruction for those seeking to successfully address the rather unique needs of these students. The good news is that most institutions already have robust systems in place for serving international students. Many of these approaches can build on existing protocols of international student and scholar services.

We offer a very hands-on support system with comprehensive international student services, academic advising with full-time professors in the discipline, a robust Intensive English Center, a writing center, and supplemental instruction/tutoring by upper-class students as well as faculty. The university has also implemented a number of other programs that have contributed to the success of our displaced students. Like many campuses, we have global living and learning communities as well as *Global Friends and Families* where we connect incoming students with families in the community. Further, in what is called the IPALS program, we pair international students in English language/writing courses with intercultural communication and education/diversity courses to work on joint projects both in and out of the classroom. In 2014 we instituted a new food service option called *Harmony*, which offers Halal meals as well as more international and organic cuisine.

Indeed, identifying the specific and rather unique needs of these students (e.g., visas, financial, counseling, housing, etc.) up-front can make the process much easier. In our case, we consulted with alumni who are with various legal, governmental or intergovernmental agencies (e.g., UN, Homeland Security, State Department, immigration firms, etc.) for advice on not only student needs but also other

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family members that might be seeking asylum or refugee status. Indeed, universities need to be prepared to deal with complex familial situations that may go beyond the normal student needs. As we have incorporated increasing numbers and diversity of students and situations, these current students and alumni serve as mentors and advisors for potential and incoming students and families.

In fall 2015, a group of some 125 university and community members joined forces to create *Scholars for Syria*, an organization dedicated to supporting our displaced students and their families, to help the local community understand Syria's rich culture, humanize the civil war and explain the complexities surround the region's current crisis. Through a series of lectures, panel discussions, poetry readings, and primary/secondary school outreach, the broader community has truly come together. Many of our Syrian students have been very active on the media circuit, engaging in interviews with television network affiliates, National Public Radio, and even the Chronicle of Higher Education. During the controversy over Indiana's resistance to Syrian refugees, our students publically invited the governor to join them at the University of Evansville's Annual International Student Bazaar where he could interact with actual Syrians who are successful in their academic and professional endeavors (as many of them also work throughout the region with internships and part-time professional employment).

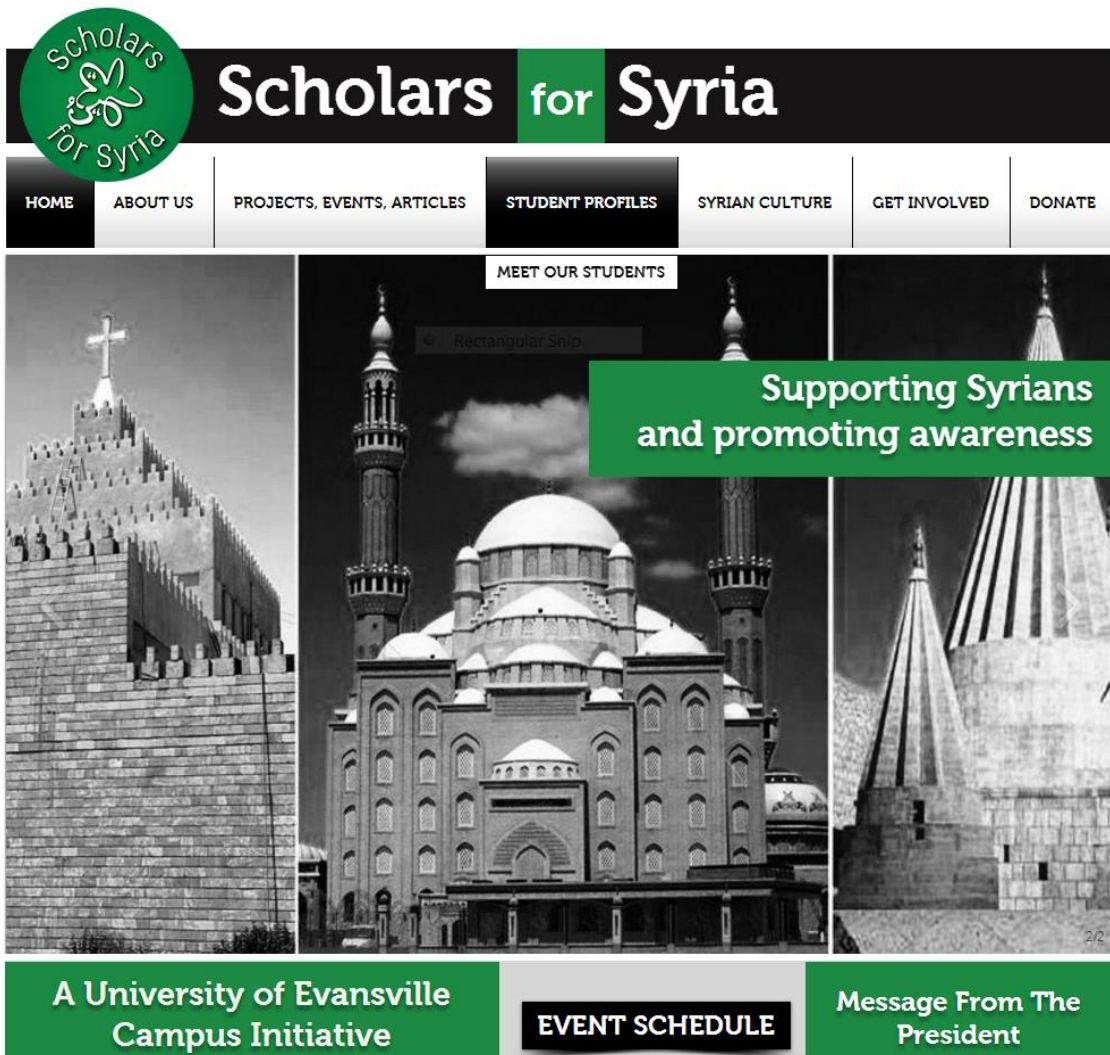
Finally, interfaith dialog stemming from our university's religious life programs and involving the local Islamic center, Jewish temple and other religious representatives have further contributed to an increasingly rich understanding of our community's growing diversity. The most recent manifestation of this outreach was exhibited in Spring 2016 with the formal dedication of the majestic Muslim Prayer Room, located in the University Chapel. The Prayer Room has been warmly received and is the result of extensive student, faculty, administration, and community interaction and cooperation.

As we strive to incorporate more displaced students at the University of Evansville, the global situation appears to be increasingly challenging. In addition to more students with greater needs, increasing numbers of our Syrian applicants are being denied F-1 visas multiple times. While many are ultimately successful, it does indicate that universities will need to be more proactive and be prepared to provide intensive assistance and advice throughout the entire application process. Having said that, we believe that the enormous benefits of welcoming displaced students into the university community far outweighs the real challenges that are increasingly present. If we are to begin to make a significant difference in preventing a lost generation of young scholars with the devastating impact that would



have on society, we must collectively take on the challenge and scale up our efforts in a systematic manner.

*Wesley Millner is the Executive Director of International Programs and Professor of Political Science & International Studies at the University of Evansville.*



The banner features a green circular logo on the left with the text "Scholars for Syria" and a stylized green symbol. To the right, the text "Scholars for Syria" is displayed in white on a black background. Below this is a navigation menu with the following items: HOME, ABOUT US, PROJECTS, EVENTS, ARTICLES, STUDENT PROFILES, SYRIAN CULTURE, GET INVOLVED, and DONATE. The main content area is divided into three vertical panels. The left panel shows a stone wall with a cross on top. The middle panel shows a large mosque with a central dome and minarets, with a "MEET OUR STUDENTS" label above it. The right panel shows a stone wall with a pointed tower. A green banner across the middle panels reads "Supporting Syrians and promoting awareness". At the bottom, there are three green boxes: "A University of Evansville Campus Initiative", "EVENT SCHEDULE", and "Message From The President".

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## **Defining the Challenges and Developing Solutions: Illinois Tech's Support for Syrian Students**

By Megan E. Mozina & Gerald P. Doyle

In the summer of 2012, we spent a blindingly rapid sixty days identifying, evaluating, enrolling, supporting, and fundraising for our first sixteen students from Syria. After what felt like just as many hours anxiously awaiting the first arrivals at O'Hare International Airport, we took our newest Illinois Tech Scarlet Hawks to their residence halls where they met some fellow students. Despite being from completely different countries, cultures, and backgrounds, our Syrian students connected with other students from Illinois Institute of Technology who knew what it was like not only to come from a conflict region, but to have their homes represented in a negative light, shoving into the dark the rich cultures and the warm families that made their homes what they really were. Whether they were from countries of historical conflict like Liberia and Lebanon, or from regions with current day conflict like gang-controlled parts of Honduras and Chicago, the students immediately established mutual understanding amongst themselves - and then they ran off to play soccer or commiserate over late-night study sessions.

Illinois Institute of Technology has a history of supporting students from a diversity of backgrounds and has strived to provide students with equitable levels of support according to their needs. In welcoming our 41 Syrian students (as of Spring 2016), we have renewed our understanding that events across the world connect back to us at Illinois Tech. With students representing nearly 100 countries and dozens more countries represented through our research and professional collaborations, there are few events in the U.S. and around the world that do not in some way impact us as a community. With that in mind, we took the same approach in on-boarding our Syrian students that we did in starting the initiative and applied our learning from other domestic and international initiatives: we defined the challenges, developed solutions, and celebrated successes. The two main areas of challenges addressed in this article are those relating to application and enrollment and those relating to students' on-campus experience and life in the U.S.

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## **Access to higher education**

Like most international prospective students applying to U.S. higher education institutions, most Syrian students have problems with online applications, they lack some of the social capital required to understand the application process, and they have financial concerns. However, unlike most international applicants, some Syrian applicants are not only living with intermittent internet access, but they never know when the electricity will come and go. Unlike most international applicants, they may not have access to official transcripts because their home university was bombed or because they escaped their family home. They may not be able to provide letters of recommendation because their professors may have died or fled, or because they may have differing political or religious affiliations. Unlike most international applicants, their lives may be at risk if they do all that they can to meet university deadlines. Unlike most international applicants, the large majority of their families' financial resources may be dedicated to paying for food and heat.

There are a multitude of challenges that applicants from high risk places face. Most of our suggestions could apply to any students at risk, domestically and abroad, and could apply to many international students. However, at this time, Syrian students, whether F-1 visa holders or refugees are facing anomalous challenges. Some of the suggestions outlined below may take more time and may not be as efficient as the standard application and review process. However, they support three guiding principles:

1. To consider equity over equality.
2. To focus on the end goal of enrolling exceptional students.
3. To give this small but special population the benefit of doubt.

Institutions do not necessarily need to be lax or flexible, but they may need to be creative. Through slight adjustments with these principles in mind, institutions can equitably accommodate great applicants and still maintain the caliber and integrity of the application process.

For instance, to account for challenges in the online application process, institutions should consider developing alternate applications that are easy to save, that require less bandwidth, and that do not require information that students at risk cannot provide. When applications have certain required fields that students cannot answer, they might not complete the application or they might put incorrect information simply to be able to submit it. An ideal option could even be a fillable PDF that applicants can download and work on in the safety of their homes with their family whether or not they have consistent internet access, which is especially important for some female applicants whose families

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want to be more involved in the process. Since applicants who are victims of high risk situations usually do not have the same access to and knowledge of the application process, such adjustments allow for greater equity.

To account for missing documents, it is especially important to focus on the end goal, not the means of getting there. The point of the application process is to evaluate the likelihood that a student is able to succeed at the academic institution, so when students are lacking certain documents or access to certain exams, consider other ways to evaluate their abilities. For instance, the point of a standardized English test is to evaluate one's ability to successfully communicate in an academic program in English, so how could you evaluate their English ability if they are living in a place that does not offer such tests? For this and other such challenges, consider the resources of the institution and the community. English language program staff support, writing samples, video conferencing, and even Facebook chats could all help meet that end goal. To evaluate the applicants' academic abilities, and even to be able to hear the applicants' individual voices, institutions could have students take placement tests or course exams; converse with faculty members, alumni, or knowledgeable community members; or audit a class or an online course to gauge placement and ability. Although institutions can give the applicants the benefit of the doubt, they should build in contingency plans. For instance, they can accept scanned documents for the application but require official documents upon arrival to campus. Institutions can also cross-verify documents between multiple applicants who may be from the same Syrian university. Having an intensive, proactive monitoring plan in place for the first week or two of the semester would help determine if students were placed into the correct courses, still allowing enough time to adjust if not in the right level.

Financing higher education is a question of equity across so many demographics, though especially for students from high risk countries. To account for funding challenges, institutions should get creative, especially when thinking about the scholarships that could apply. The institution's advancement and alumni relations offices could identify potential donors, such as alumni from the country in question, alumni who have other types of affiliation (such as being from a country that had an emergency situation or also being a female engineer), or companies whose missions of corporate social responsibility might align with a scholarship program. Leveraging networks, such as local religious organizations and potential area host families, can be very helpful in terms of scholarships or reducing housing costs. Establishing a university fee to help students in emergency situations would not only help

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Syrian students, but it would also help a variety of students in need and would make a statement about the student body's values. Syrian students who may be in the U.S. and eligible for federal financial aid may require additional help in how to complete the FAFSA. Ultimately the end goal is supporting students at risk, which allows for creative funding that benefits both the institution and its collaborators.

Overall, clear communication with applicants and colleagues is one of the most important elements to keep in mind, especially considering the inconsistencies and lack of trust that students face in conflict situations. Clear communication around eligibility, the application process, the importance of deadlines, costs (including fees, penalties, anticipated increases in tuition), and other such topics shows respect for them as individuals and for your process. Even simple acknowledgement of their emails and telling them by when they will hear from you again (and making sure you really do follow up by then) helps to reduce their stress and minimize the chances of them leaving their homes in conflict areas to check for an email that has not yet been sent. In our experience, being upfront and honest with Syrian applicants, in addition to being kind and empathetic, is a greatly appreciated relief in relation to the mirage of the past life from which many wish to escape.

### **On-Campus Support**

Like most international students studying in the U.S. for the first time, our Syrian students were nervous about getting to campus, they were unaware of the built-in support systems at the university, and they were uncomfortable with the adjustment process. However, unlike most international students studying in the U.S. for the first time, they had extremely heightened stress levels about getting through immigration, especially for those whose passports were stamped by the Syrian rebel army upon exiting their homeland and for those who still felt that this too-good-to-be-true opportunity must be a trap. Unlike most international students, our Syrian students had a hard time believing that the free counseling services on campus truly were safe and confidential. They were not sure how acceptable it was to step out of class when the stress of not being able to reach their family after finding out that their home neighborhood had just been attacked was just too much to bear on top of Multivariate Calculus. Unlike most international students, they found it almost impossible to transfer money, plummeting in value by the day, out of their home country; they had to be reminded that the explosions they heard near campus were nothing more than fireworks in celebration of a White Sox home run; and they suffered a "why me?" guilt, living comfortably and studying productively in Chicago while their families endured intermittent utilities and their former classmates fought battles on the streets of their

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hometowns. Unlike most international students, they had to endure employer background checks that could take longer than the internship itself or rescinded offers of a dream job because Syria is an embargoed country.

We unfolded the layers of challenges facing the students through countless one-on-one meetings and small group lunchtime assemblages with the Syrian students, through the counsel of the EducationUSA-Syria advisor, and through seminars co-sponsored with Jusoor focusing on how the students could serve their country in the short- and long-term. As we got to know the students, we realized just how strong and perseverant they were, and we were able to identify how to best support them.

In order to develop a sustainable approach for student support, we served as initial liaisons with a variety of campus partners, resulting in the students being embraced by the entire university community. Our student affairs offices warmly welcomed and proactively supported the students. Although Illinois Tech has a diverse campus body, having the Syrian students on campus opened new conversations with these offices regarding cultural transitions, the preferences of Muslim residents, and emotional support for those from conflict areas. The Student Health & Wellness Center, whose efforts happened confidentially and discretely and therefore without fanfare, was particularly keen in anticipating the needs of our students. Academically, in addition to the Academic Resource Center, Writing Center, Galvin Library, and Career Services, numerous faculty members offered direct support to students, seeing this initiative as one that was consistent with the mission of the university from our founding, and as such, that what we were doing was in many ways, what we had always done. Importantly, university leadership insisted that the students be welcomed and supported first and foremost as students, allowing them to settle into the university in the ways in which they had excelled and contributed at their universities in Syria. One of our most significant takeaways is the importance of communicating with colleagues about what you are doing, how they can help, and why is it important. Tying support of students at risk into the mission, vision, and historical context of your educational institution helps to create buy-in in a world of competing priorities.

Externally, we connected students with a variety of entities, such as the Center for Arabic Language & Culture, to engage with the community and help others learn their mother tongue; with the UNESCO Center for Peace, whose Executive Director Guy Djoken served as a facilitator of reflection at a key point in the students' adjustment; with companies interested in recruiting these students for internships and

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future employment; and with alumni who wanted to serve as mentors. From the beginning, we collaborated with the Syrian expatriate organization Jusoor, with EducationUSA-Syria, and with the Institute of International Education, without whose partnerships none of this would have been possible.

Upon reflection, we recognize that this undertaking also reflected our ability to listen deeply and empathetically to our prospective Syrian applicants and to invite and gain their trust with the process and to permit, to the extent possible, our Syrian students to co-create with us and inform the very support process itself. Much of what we learned, we did so from the very first day by ceding some of the control of the process to our students - now our alumni. We like to say that this is the best form of innovative collaboration, that is, when all parties are involved in a new place that is being built together.

### **Celebrating Success**

As a result, the students have excelled as scholars and leaders within the campus and their communities. For instance, through a combination of the support they received and their own drive, the students founded Illinois Tech's first Syrian Club and the student chapter of the Arab American Association of Engineers & Architects. We have had Syrian students lead the Clinton Global Initiative's "Up to Us" nationwide campus competition; be the only student speaker at TEDxIIT; and be Resident Assistants, Peer Career Coaches, and Leadership Academy Scholars. A Syrian student was even elected as our 2016-2017 Student Government Association President to a student population of 8,000! Our Syrian students have accumulated such accolades as the "Fifty for the Future" award from the Illinois Technology Foundation; the DAAD scholarship for advanced research in Germany; and first place in such competitions as Illinois Tech's undergraduate research, JP Morgan's "Code for Good" event, and MHacks' "Best Healthcare Hack Innovation" (the world's largest hackathon). They have volunteered locally with Illinois Tech's "Big Event," nationally with Alternative Spring Break, and abroad in Peru and Lebanon. They created the "Syrian Students for a Better Future" blog which, with nearly 200 posts and over 50,000 views across 125 countries, serves as a platform for reflection and sharing about their experiences. Professionally, our Syrian students and alumni have interned at or been hired by some of the top companies in the world and have gone on to some of the best graduate schools in their fields. Overall, the Syrian students on campus are seen as motivated leaders who inspire others to excel from classroom to community to career.

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Finally, the lessons gained are infinitely transferable and adaptable. The community organizing and capacity building framework introduced into this work provides an approach that challenges the status quo of how we might accomplish the seemingly impossible together by expanding our conception of available resources to include those within, across, and beyond our institutions. When leveraging such resources, we can support the dream of more equitable access to higher education globally.

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## **Transforming Lives, Building Community: Active Engagement in the IIE Consortium Addressing the Crisis in Syria**

By Brenda Tooley

*The real and lasting victories are those of peace, and not of war. - Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Monmouth College joined the IIE Syria Consortium addressing the crisis in higher education in Syria in late 2012. Involvement began under Mauri Ditzler's presidency at the college and came about because I successfully encouraged our participation soon after the Illinois Institute of Technology and IIE launched the Consortium. We offered two full tuition scholarships to Syrian undergraduates each year from 2013 through 2016. In addition, we set aside a number of our highest merit scholarships for international students for Syrians. In my experience, all of the Syrian students admitted to the college have been admirable young people – courageous, academically well prepared and highly motivated, and eager to become involved in campus life.

We welcomed our first cohort of students in the fall of 2013. The first of these students graduated in May, 2015: Mariela Shaker, '15, a transfer student from the University of Aleppo, is the gifted young violinist who has received international recognition for her talent and her advocacy for Syrian and other refugee/displaced students. In 2015-16, nineteen degree-seeking Syrian students were enrolled at the small liberal arts college, four of whom graduated in May, 2016. The college will welcome three more in the fall of 2016.

I have worked with all of the Syrian students at this institution who have applied for admission. Our retention and graduation rate for Syrian students, I am delighted to say, is extremely high (which suggests that our assessment and selection process throughout the admissions pipeline is working). In this short essay, I will outline about what I've done, what I've learned, what feedback I've received from students about their experience in applying to a college in the United States, and I will share the insights and recommendations of several of our current Syrian students about college and university outreach to students in conflict zones.

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I would like to note the different background circumstances of the Syrian students at the college. None of our Syrian students to date have been, technically, refugees (that is, registered with the UNHCR). We have welcomed students who live in Syria and still have families in Syria – in Damascus, Aleppo, Lattakia, Homs – as well as students who were displaced, usually but not always with their families, fairly early in the conflict or immediately before).

### **Admitting Syrian Students**

I have experienced very few administrative hurdles in our participation in the IIE Syria Consortium. The college is a small, residential, private liberal arts college in the United States. We have 1100 students, and an 11:1 student-faculty ratio. We do not have a larger organization within which we need to coordinate our admissions processes. When we joined the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis in late 2012, our president simply said ‘let’s make this happen!’ And I then began to do just that. Working within the larger context of IIE ensured a network of thoughtful, highly informed colleagues. I formulated talking points for our president to share with his senior leadership and with interested trustees and friends of the college and shared information about IIE’s long-standing commitment to educational diplomacy and its experience in coordinating international initiatives such as this one. Together, President Ditzler and I made a short video supporting the IIE Consortium and seeking funds for the first round of scholarships for Syrian undergraduates, to which we received a quick response from alumni and from people who had never heard of Monmouth College before but who wished to assist. Internal conversations were unfussed and positive: the associate dean of student life, Mohsin Masood, was immediately supportive, as was the director of intercultural life, Ruby Pentsil-Bukari. Faculty members in political science, sociology, religious studies and many more disciplines were interested and supportive, eager to see what would result from our participation in the IIE consortium.

Colleagues at IIE were wonderful supports as we launched Monmouth College’s part in the Consortium, as was EducationUSA-Syria, whose advice to me and to student applicants was simply invaluable – always timely, supportive, realistic yet encouraging. Vice Provost Gerald (Jerry) Doyle and Megan Mozina from the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), the institution that jointly founded the initiative with IIE, were amazing colleagues from the very beginning.

Kristi Hippen and I worked closely together in the early months of our participation to review documents, especially transfer materials from university students hoping to continue their studies in the

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United States. We sought to understand the students' educational backgrounds and how best to place them into classes and with academic advisors; Kristi's long experience in the admissions office before becoming Registrar, particularly in the area of transfer transcript evaluation) was immensely helpful, an important element in our welcome of Syrian students. Kristi and I reviewed Syrian students with *partial* documentation, but far more often we saw (and I still see) *complete but scanned* transcripts and baccalaureate certificates (almost never original documents). Kristi points out that she is not an expert in evaluating educational documents from Syria; nor am I. However, between the two of us we now have considerable experience and I am delighted to note that we have been very successful in placing Syrian students into classes that have enabled them to flourish. We know this because of the academic performance of our students. We have not lost any Syrian students because of academic difficulties – the only Syrian students who have left have transferred away because of family considerations.

The most time intensive point of engagement in the IIE Consortium is the application and admission process. This for me was a matter of highly individualized outreach via email, and later Skype and Facebook messaging, with prospective students. When our scholarships for Syrian students first appeared on the IIE Consortium webpage, I received a flood of inquiries – many heartbreaking. I corresponded with many students who had no hope of coming to the United States for undergraduate study, whose circumstances were dire or whose academic qualifications were not a good fit. Finances were a concern for students from the beginning: even with full-tuition scholarships, there are out-of-pocket costs for room, board, health insurance, and students also needed to budget for non-college costs such as travel, books and personal items. The visa process generated an understandable degree of anxiety: students had to travel to another country simply to apply for the F1 visa to enter the United States. This was not always safe to do and with the Syria conflict in its sixth year, visa denials have become increasingly frequent.

The application procedure at the college is as straightforward as is possible for international applicants. We do not charge an admissions fee, and I waive the SAT/ACT requirement for scholarship consideration for Syrian students living in Syria because testing is not available in the country. I evaluate TOEFL/IELTS scores on a case-by-case basis, approving within a range, as is done for all international students who are academically promising in all other respects. I read application essays carefully. Most Syrian students resident in Syria in our first wave of matriculating students (in 2013, more so than now) had access to TOEFL testing (the paper-based version) and could provide exam results as well as transcripts

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(courses and marks) and school-leaving documentation; others, who were already outside of Syria, came from private or national schools in stable countries and thus had ready access to transcripts, school-leaving documentation and standardized tests. We accept the Common App but we also have an alternative application form created specifically for international students. I contact applicants as soon as our system registers that they've begun the application form. As students move into the admissions process, I message with them on Facebook. I meet with them and their parents on Skype. The admissions process is a relationship-building process – more so for Syrian students, even, than it is in general for international students.

In preparing a news item on our participation in the IIE Consortium, I reviewed the names of students appearing on the Dean's List for Fall '15 (our most recent Dean's List): eight Syrian students are on this list out of 20 Syrian students enrolled in the fall semester, or 40% of the total. This is a fine point in evidence of the academic seriousness and ability of the Syrian students at the College. At the end of each semester, students earning at least 12 semester hours of letter-grade credits and achieving a grade-point average of 3.67 or higher are named to the Dean's List. For those universities and colleges concerned about review of partial or photocopied academic credentials of displaced students and students from conflict zones in the admissions process, this may serve to reassure that the academic outcome for student and college may be very good indeed.

As is probably often the case at small, liberal arts colleges, we have an array of ways in which we test students. Each department does something a bit different in order to gauge preparation for particular courses or major sequences.

*Languages:* We have placement examinations for Spanish, French and German. These are web-based and readily available. The chair of the classics department meets one-on-one with students to assess Latin and Greek placements.

*Math and Statistics:* Our new quantitative reasoning general education structure uses ACT exam results to place students into appropriate math and statistics courses. All incoming students take the QRLA (Quantitative Reasoning Literacy Assessment) as part of the benchmarking effort in the new QR structure. Our Teaching and Learning Center team are considering Accu-Placer for mathematics, reading and writing (the ETS version of Compass). We hope to identify students for whom a skills refresher

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course in the fall would be valuable. The QR committee is in the process of developing new introductory QR courses; one of our economics professors is developing a course which has a significant amount of college algebra for students with low Math ACT scores who are interested in STEM fields.

*English as a Second Language:* Intercultural Life staff meet one-one-one with incoming international students and American students whose first language is not English to determine best placement in English and communication courses (required general education requirements); this also enables them to determine whether individual tutoring or ESL partial-credit courses are best for new students, both first year and transfer. We consider TOEFL, IELTS and MELAB exam results, but have found that one-on-one evaluation is helpful even when exam results are available. In our very small classes, the Syrian students quickly caught up on their English language skills. They were very soon texting me in colloquial, abbreviated American English! Also, within the first year of their studies, they were doing well in terms of academic English after considerable shyness about speaking in the first semester.

*College Preparedness:* Professor Frank Gersich, the associate dean in charge of academic support services, uses several diagnostic tests to determine students' readiness for college level work, study skills and time management ability, and confidence (the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory). This information helps the Teaching and Learning Center staff to develop workshops and study groups for the year.

Please note that while these students need and deserve faculty and community support, they are not needier than other degree-seeking international students. The admission process may be intensely interactive if it is to be effective and to result in students who understand their commitment and are satisfied in their college choice – but this is true for all international students. Once Syrian students arrive, they are like other students in their need for support, orientation and academic guidance. As is true for many international students, they benefit from a careful, well-constructed orientation to college life; and they require an introduction to resources that are not typically available outside of U.S. higher education: counseling services, the writing center, the system of academic advising, residential life opportunities and expectations, and the requirements of regular course attendance and attention to deadlines. It has been helpful, in our view, to bring a cohort of Syrian students to campus together so that they can offer one another moral and practical support. We have tried hard not to make the Syrian students feel they are different or set apart because of our participation in the Consortium, and, in fact,

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they have become deeply involved across the campus in a multitude of majors, research opportunities and student organizations and clubs. Some have wanted to speak and write about the conflict in Syria; others have wanted to simply be undergraduate students in a safe, academic environment. We have tried to honor students' preferences.

These are *very* highly motivated students. They want to succeed academically and they do not take their education for granted. Faculty members tell me that their participation in class discussions can be invigorating, even transformative, for all present, prompting thoughtful, searching conversations. They are interested in many aspects of college life: Syrian students are leaders in our interfaith initiative, Better Together (affiliated with the Interfaith Youth Core), in fraternities such as Sigma Phi Epsilon, in the international club, in choir, chorale, orchestra and ensembles, in varsity soccer, in volunteerism and in department clubs and organizations, and outstandingly in the undergraduate research program, where they have set a very high standard for all students. Many of the Syrian students have become resident assistants; several are now Head Residents. Most work on campus and are known as reliable, problem-solving, initiative-taking student employees. One, who could well have simply been hired into the web team given his excellent programming and design skills, took leadership in creating key webpages for an alumni outcomes project.

The community of Monmouth, the small town in which the college is situated, has been welcoming. Host families volunteer specifically for Syrian students. Community leaders have stopped me to say that if there is any way to help as new Syrian students come to campus, just let them know. Organizations and churches in the community have opened their doors. Mariela Shaker, the young violinist who came to the college from Aleppo, Syria, performed at many civic organizations and events, at churches across the community, at the charming little wine bar in town, as well as in cities in the region. She is not the only representative of Syria who has interacted regularly with community members, however. Syrian students have presented at Rotary meetings, have participated in interfaith conversations, and have joined – and led – charity drives for area programs.

### **Student Stories**

Mariela's story is a narrative of courage and success in the face of tremendous challenges. Many people have justly praised her talent, determination and eloquence. She is a spokesperson for the UNHCR and for Syrian refugees. She recently performed at an event at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva,

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Switzerland that highlighted the plight of refugees; she appeared in a Brookings Institute panel discussion about the crisis in Syria. She performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC for the UNHRC World Refugee Day event in June, 2015 and was named a White House Champion of Change 2015. Her story has appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post and Women's Day magazine. However, she is not the only amazing student from Syria whom I have come to know. Below, I share the reflections and advice on the process of admitting and supporting Syrian students of three other admirable, accomplished Syrian students at Monmouth College:

Jad Freyha '16 (computer science major, math minor; chorale; Sig Ep leadership; international club):

"Monica Ibrahim of EducationUSA-Syria was a great help to me in finding colleges in the United States. I contacted her through email and Facebook, and she helped me apply to different colleges; I thought Monmouth College was the best match for me. I found many other helpful guides to the application process through Jusoor's and the Illinois Institute of Technology's webpages. In the application process, the best means of communication with the admission office was through email, which was fast, reliable and efficient. After I was accepted, I join the Facebook incoming class group, which helped me get a perspective on what was waiting for me on campus (beyond what I found on the college's website).

I read the contents of the admissions package I received very carefully, and I felt that I needed to follow its instructions word by word because I was very anxious and needed all the guidance I could get. Between the time of receiving the package and arriving in the U.S., I had to apply for campus housing, the host family program, find out what to pack and apply for the visa, which proved to be the most stressful thing of all. I applied through the embassy in Algeria, where I was residing at the time. This proved to be better than applying at the embassy in Lebanon, which has been overwhelmed with Syrian applicants for the F1 visa.

I was sure about my major before I applied, although adding a minor (mathematics) came later to supplement the major. I had a lot of questions about the professional opportunities to be pursued after college, and the college website provided good information. I have been very satisfied with my academic experience. Now, in my third year, I am having some trouble finding summer internships that will complement my academic experience, but I am otherwise very satisfied."

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Khadr Eskandar '17 (biochemistry and physics double-major; SigEp; undergraduate research; soccer; 3-3 biomedical engineering program):

"I found out about Jusoor and the IIE Consortium colleges through a family member. I found the process of applying to college not difficult because the consortium members were accessible on an IIE website that was easy to find through Google. All the requirements for the different colleges were clearly noted. The most helpful process was direct communication with Dr. Bren through email. I was able to ask questions, get a feeling of what the college was like, and how friendly the college community is – and get direct encouragement and support, as well. She followed my application process piece by piece and helped me find solutions to problems. From what I remember, even though the time difference was an issue in getting a quick response, she was always on top of her email and I had direct and fast feedback.

The Facebook page for incoming students helped me meet new classmates and gave me insight into the diversity that I was about to experience and the different items I needed as a first-year in college. Applying for the appointment for the visa interview in Kuwait after receiving my I-20 was not difficult: I was just myself in the interview, bringing all the documents required and answering the questions they asked. The visa took two days to be stamped and delivered. It was not hard to find a flight, but it was hard to find a cheap flight! My flight was 34 hours long with three stops (it was the cheapest flight available). In my experience, it is really important for the new-student orientation leaders to be waiting at the airport because this gives the student a great feeling of welcome.

My orientation week really helped prepare me for my first college year. Being with other international students, experiencing the same things together and learning from our orientation leaders about the college's history, our classes and professors, and the restaurants in town, and such, was a great start to a feeling of belonging on campus. I chose my major before I started at Monmouth, but after having physics classes and discovering my interests, I found what I like and where I fit in the most. I was pre-med at first. Learning about the process of applying to med school is very important, and this applies not only to pre-med majors but to any other major that precedes a professional degree. On 'mentoring day,' classes are canceled so that professors and advisors can provide information about professional schools and careers, and



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this has led me into the professional track I am now following. I think my academic experience has been the best experience I could ask for: being in a small liberal arts college with the opportunity to be in small classes and have easy and direct connection with my professors. I think that's the best education I could have. I'm able to talk with my classmates and hear out their perspectives, ask questions in class and during the professor's office hours. My involvement in the soccer team and in a fraternity makes my college experience more rounded and unique. I'm grateful to be in such an institution."

Hind Allouch '16 (psychology major; leadership in the interfaith group Better Together; resident assistant):

"I still remember the day my father suggested the idea of studying in the U.S. I thought was a very nice idea, but hard to achieve. Yet my father thought it was doable! In 2012, I finished my baccalaureate in Damascus with honor, having the highest average in the capital. At first, I sought for scholarships in the surrounding countries – for two reasons. First, I thought it was hard to find scholarships for study in the U.S. Second, as an 18-year-old girl, I was afraid to take such a step and leave my home. However, my father ignored all my fears and concerns; he focused on the fact that I am a high-achieving student in a war zone who deserved to get a high quality education. So, my father and I formed a team to search out opportunities, apply for admission, and prepare for this coming step in my life.

The first thing I did was contact Monica Ibrahim of EducationUSA-Syria by email to ask her about scholarship opportunities. She was incredibly helpful. My father and I created a worksheet with her for all of the colleges and universities offering scholarships. Then I started to prepare for the application process. I began a TOEFL class immediately. This was very helpful because it enabled me to improve my English while I was in contact with Monica and going through the admission process. However, I couldn't take this course with an official school because the school was closed due to the war. I took classes with a local teacher, then applied for the official test. I also started to prepare all my important documents. I gathered my high school (baccalaureate) and middle school transcripts, two recommendation letters, my vaccination reports and all other necessary documents and had them translated by a specialist, and then scanned them and saved them on my computer. This step helped me a lot because now I had all required documents ready to be emailed any time.

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After looking at a number of colleges in the IIE consortium, I decided to apply to Monmouth College. Monica Ibrahim helped me find the school and gave me the international admission email so I could start the application process. I immediately contacted Dr. Brenda Tooley, and she was very helpful in explaining the admission process for me. I applied and got admitted. I still remember my feeling while reading the letter of admission – the happiest ever!

After being admitted, I prepared for my visa process. Monica Ibrahim helped a lot in preparing for this step. She sent me possible questions I might be asked. I completed my visa interview at the American embassy in Beirut. I got the visa and traveled to the U.S. in August, 2013.

When I arrived on campus, my orientation leader welcomed me and took me on a tour around campus. The orientation period helped me become familiar with campus. School started, and I was adjusting to a new environment. During my first semester, I wasn't sure what major to choose. I set down with my advisor and discussed with her my future plans. She helped me decide what classes to take and what major might suit my plans the best.

Today, I am a psychology senior student graduating next semester (Fall, 2016). I am also an interfaith leader in Better Together and a residence hall assistant. And I am one of the students who have their names on the Dean's List, under the section "Syria"!

My helpful tips to other Syrian students for applying to U.S. colleges and universities:

1. Use the available sources of information to see what universities are offering scholarships within your field of interest.
2. Begin improving your English by preparing for the TOEFL or a similar test.
3. Prepare all your transcripts in advance and have them translated, scanned and saved as PDF files.
4. When going in for the visa interview, bring all the documents you used to apply for admission with you.
5. Arrive at your college as early as you can (as early as the campus allows) to become more familiar with the atmosphere before school begins.

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6. Ask for all the available resources on campus when you arrive so that you know what they are. (For example, tutoring services, the writing center, counseling services, etc.)
  7. Don't load yourself with too many classes, especially in the first semester.
  8. Don't be afraid of this experience: if we did it, you can do it.
  9. Studying in the United States is a life-changing experience, and the education you will get is worth every effort taken to achieve it.

*Brenda Tooley is the Director of the Stellyes Center for Global Studies at Knox College.*

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The Institute of International Education, founded in 1919, is a world leader in the exchange of people and ideas. IIE has a network of 30 offices and representatives worldwide and 1,100 college and university members. In collaboration with governments, corporate and private foundations, and other sponsors, IIE designs and implements programs of study and training for students, educators, young professionals, and trainees from all sectors with funding from government and private sources. These programs include the Fulbright and Humphrey Fellowships and the Gilman Scholarships, administered for the U.S. Department of State, and the Boren Scholarships and Fellowships administered for the National Security Education Program. IIE's publications include the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, as well as *Funding for United States Study*, the *IIE Passport Study Abroad* print and online directories, and the [StudyAbroadFunding.org](http://StudyAbroadFunding.org) website. [www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org)

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- Providing advice and liaison services through IIE's network of international offices and partners. Collecting and disseminating best practices in developing institutional linkages and programs.
- Convening conferences and symposia of international educators and other leaders in the field.
- Producing timely policy research papers on critical issues.
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