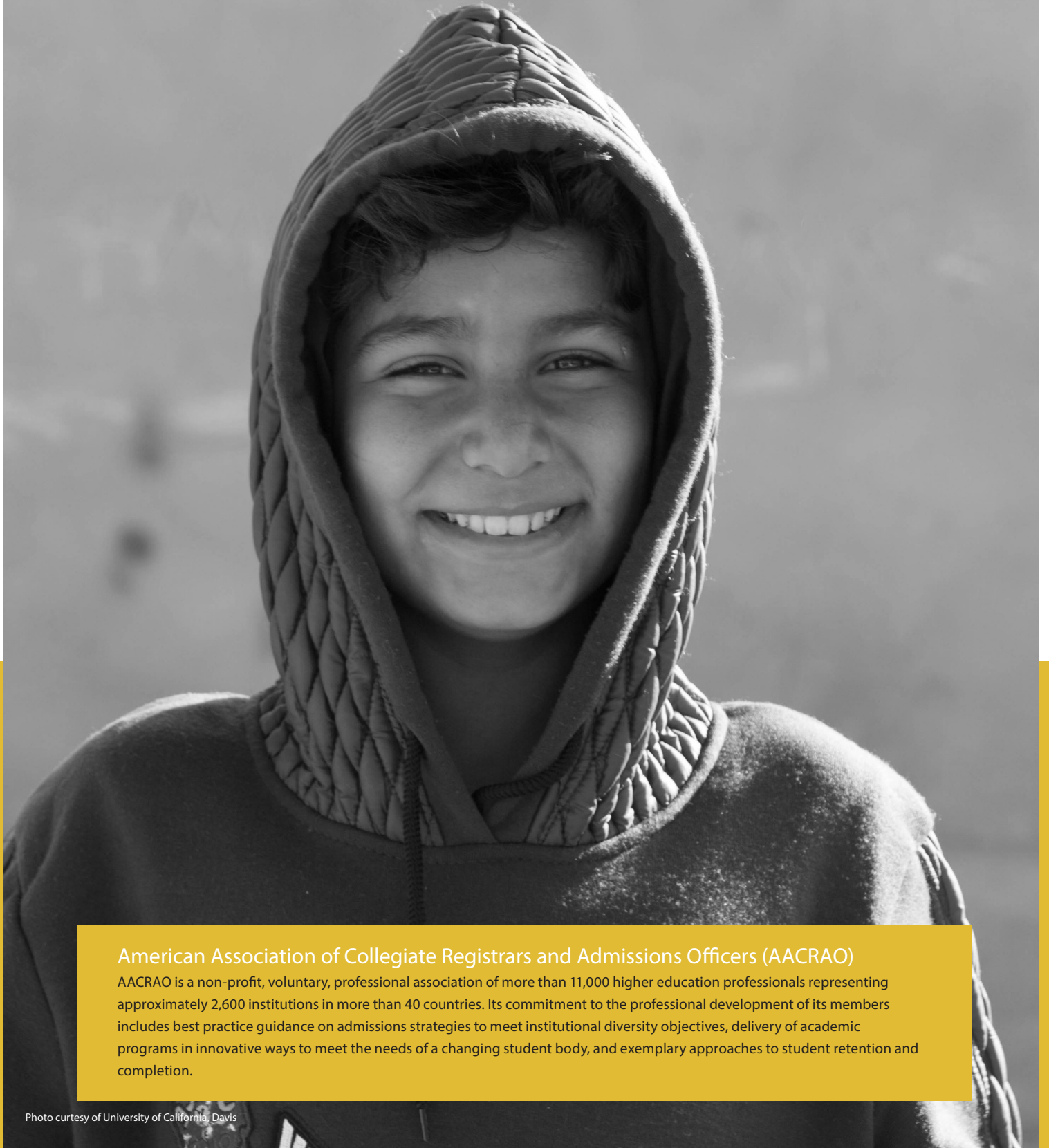


# Inclusive Admissions Policies for Displaced and Vulnerable Students

2019 Report



## American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

AACRAO is a non-profit, voluntary, professional association of more than 11,000 higher education professionals representing approximately 2,600 institutions in more than 40 countries. Its commitment to the professional development of its members includes best practice guidance on admissions strategies to meet institutional diversity objectives, delivery of academic programs in innovative ways to meet the needs of a changing student body, and exemplary approaches to student retention and completion.

Photo courtesy of University of California, Davis



Everyone has a right  
to education

Photo caption: Annetta Stroud, Associate Director, Training and Program Development, AACRAO onsite in Lebanon for the launch of the Article 26 Backpack.  
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# Contents

- The Voice of the Academy 6
- Our Shared Responsibility 8
- Legislative and Institutional Policy Context 9
- Barriers to access 10
- Taking Action 10
- Section Summaries 11
  
- Scholar Perspectives 12
- Freedoms Afforded by the Academy:
  - Historical Analysis 16
  - Freedoms Afforded by the Academy:
    - The Contemporary Landscape 17
    - Charting New Terrain:
      - 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges of Academics in Exile 18
  
- Perspectives of Displaced Students and Their Allies 24
  - Addressing Needs and Challenges 26
  - Case Examples 28
  
- Institutional Perspective 40
  - Things to Consider 40
  - Institutional Perspectives 41
  - Case Studies 45
  
- Admissions Policies 48
  - Formulating Institutional Policy and Procedures 51
  - Tools 52
  - Working with a Credential Evaluation Service 62
  - Additional Thoughts 63
  
- General Resources 65



# Support Displaced and Vulnerable Students

## AACRAO Pledge to Support Vulnerable and Displaced Students

We, as members of the higher education community, recognize our responsibility and duty to support access to higher education for all humans, particularly the most vulnerable among us.

As refugee crises continue to unfold across the globe, students and scholars displaced by conflict and natural disasters need our unflinching advocacy.

We recognize that we are in a unique position to marshal the policies, practices, and resources needed to open the doors to higher education, and we affirm that educated exiles are a boon both to their resettled communities, and to their home countries, where they often serve critical roles in rebuilding after catastrophe.

Through concerted, collaborative efforts, we pledge to work to reduce the cultural, structural, and financial barriers to higher education and to promote at-risk students' right to access higher education for the benefit of us all.



[www.aacrao.org/PledgeforEducation](http://www.aacrao.org/PledgeforEducation)

Take the pledge to support displaced and vulnerable students.

## Excerpt from The Voice of the Academy

Refugees are among the most vulnerable of human populations. In addition to the incredible personal hardships they have endured, their access to higher education is often sharply limited. According to the UNHCR, only 1 percent of refugees who were forced to leave their homes because of war, armed conflict, persecution, or natural disaster have the opportunity to earn a university degree, compared with the global average of 36 percent.

The academic community can and must protect this population's right to education. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulates this humanitarian obligation:

*Everyone has a right to Education... directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*

Higher education is not a luxury, but a right and a necessity, both for individuals and for society. Its benefits cannot be overstated: It is strongly linked to an individual's increased future opportunities, and an educated population is crucial both in countries where refugees resettle, as well as countries affected by conflicts and natural disasters. Refugees and immigrants contribute significantly to their newly resettled communities and societies, and refugees who receive higher education often play critical roles in rebuilding after conflict or disaster.

"We need to train teachers to teach primary and secondary education, journalists to empower refugees and displaced populations to be their own voice, doctors to take care of the sick, engineers to rebuild infrastructure, artists, social workers, lawyers, and the list goes on," said Nele Feldmann, Head of Student Emergency Initiatives at the Institute of International Education (IIE). "And who is better poised to defend this universal human right than universities, colleges, and educational non-profit organizations?"

# 01

## The Voice of the Academy

Dr. Kyle Farmbry  
Jisun Jeong  
Jane Roche  
Dr. Belma Sadikovic  
Dr. Bernhard Streitwieser  
Dr. Keith David Watenpaugh

*Melanie Gottlieb (AACRAO), Mona Finucane (UC Davis), Keith David Watenpaugh (UC Davis),  
Annetta Stroud (AACRAO), Mike Reilly (AACRAO) in Beirut, Lebanon for the Article 26 Backpack  
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Keith David Watenpaugh (UC Davis), Mike Reilly (AACHA), and students from the American University Beirut discussing the importance of supporting the basic human right to higher education on the AUB campus, Beirut, Lebanon.

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### Our shared responsibility

According to the UNHCR, only 1 percent of refugees who were forced to leave their homes because of war, armed conflict, persecution or natural disaster have the opportunity to earn a university degree, compared with the global average of 36 percent<sup>2</sup>. We are at risk of losing an entire generation. It is our responsibility as members of the academic community to protect this generation's right to education. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulates this humanitarian obligation:

*Everyone has a right to Education...Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote*

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR. (2016). Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis. Geneva: UNHCR. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/59b696f44.pdf>

*understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*

Building on this, Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states, "Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means."

In other words, higher education is not a luxury but a necessity, both for individuals and for society.<sup>3,4</sup> For individual refugees, it is strongly linked to increased future opportunities, enhanced future aspirations and hopes, and improved access to public health and other services. Most of the refugees who completed secondary education strongly

<sup>3</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S. (2011a). The politics of higher education for refugees in a global movement for primary education. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2).

<sup>4</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S. (2011b). Refugee education: A global review. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

desire higher education opportunities,<sup>5</sup> and evidence also indicates that refugees' aspiration for higher education becomes stronger after resettlement.<sup>6</sup> At the societal level, higher education is crucial in both countries affected by conflicts and natural disasters and countries where refugees resettle.

Refugees and immigrants contribute significantly to their newly resettled communities and societies.<sup>7</sup> As Nele Feldmann, Head of Student Emergency Initiatives at the Institute of International Education (IIE) stated:

*We need to train teachers to teach primary and secondary education, journalists to*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shakya, Y. B., Guruge, S., Hynie, M., Akbari, A., Malik, M., Htoo, S., ... & Alley, S. (2011). Aspirations for higher education among newcomer refugee youth in Toronto: Expectations, challenges, and strategies. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2).

<sup>7</sup> Hagstrom, P. (2000). The fiscal impact of refugee resettlement in the Mohawk Valley. Clinton, NY: Hamilton College. Retrieved August, 3, 2006.

*empower refugees and displaced populations to be their own voice, doctors to take care*

*of the sick, engineers to rebuild infrastructure, artists, social workers, lawyers and the list goes on. And who is better poised to defend this universal human right than universities, colleges, and educational non-profit organizations?*<sup>8</sup>

Refugees who receive higher education often play crucial roles as civil service or NGO workers helping with post-conflict reconstruction,<sup>9</sup> or as teachers helping to rebuild educational systems.<sup>10,11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Feldmann, Nele. (2018, December 7). JICUF and UNHCR Symposium: Supporting refugees in higher education: Japanese models and next steps. International House of Japan in Tokyo. Retrieved from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/higher-education-emergencies-around-world-japan-nele-feldmann/>

<sup>11</sup> Dryden-Peterson, S. (2011a). The politics of higher education for refugees in a global movement for primary education. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 27(2).

### Legislative and Institutional Policy Context

In response to the current forced migration crises, some higher education institutions (HEI) have demonstrated clear commitment and motivation to serve students. We commend those efforts already underway. Strong example initiatives include: the IIE Syria Consortium, in which HEI leaders from over 40 U.S. universities and colleges pledged to relax admissions requirements or waive tuition for students who fled the Syrian War, and the student-lead association, Boise State Refugee Alliance (BSRA), founded by two refugee students to help other refugees navigate college and transition into higher education to pursue their dream to obtain an education.

Despite such efforts, we face serious challenges advocating for higher education access on behalf of those who need it most.

Many countries in North America, Europe, and Asia have seen a rise in nationalist movements heavily loaded with anti-migrant rhetoric, which directly targets migrant and refugee populations as the sources of economic and social woes. In this context, the U.S. HEI community has been hit with legislative and policy barriers like Presidential Proclamation 9645 (otherwise known as the "travel ban"), making it difficult to issue student visas or to relax admissions requirements for those fleeing conflict and persecution. In light of these challenges, there is understandable apprehension among our colleagues. However, it is imperative we gather the courage to challenge unreasonable and inhumane barriers to education faced by non-native students. We believe the higher education community is in a prime position to secure protections and opportunities

for refugees and at-risk migrants. But in order to create policies and programs that will work for all, we are compelled to work together.

### Barriers to access

Regardless of their desire and intention to pursue higher education degrees, refugees and at-risk migrant students face unique challenges and barriers to access, including:

**Credential evaluation.** Even for refugees who have concluded their secondary educations, getting academic qualifications recognized can be a challenge, especially when they have fled their countries without required documentation<sup>12,13</sup> because HEIs in the United States do not have a consistent qualifications evaluation policy for refugees, asylum-seekers, and international students without proper documentation.<sup>14</sup>

**Financial aid.** Refugees and at-risk migrants face significant obstacles securing funding for higher education.<sup>15</sup> In many cases, available resources are not equitably obtainable by refugees and international students.

**Structural barriers.** On top of financial and credential challenges, refugees, at-risk migrants, and international students also must navigate an unfamiliar and bureaucratic higher education system in the U.S., including the application process, credential evaluations and transfers, and the education culture, to name a few.<sup>16</sup>

**Continuity.** Some refugee populations have experienced significant gaps in their educational pathways due to prolonged, forced periods spent in refugee camps; this delay makes it extremely difficult to be on the same academic timeline as their peers.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, a vast number of factors, including language and cultural barriers, as well as interruptions to educational pathways, present displaced students with significant obstacles when pursuing an education in the country of resettlement.

Despite these challenges, a great number of refugee students persist with their dream of obtaining higher education, but their needs often go unnoticed. As previously noted, some HEIs have begun responding to grassroots advocacy efforts of students from refugee backgrounds, such as the aforementioned BSRA. BSRA has not only assisted refugee students in various administrative procedures as they navigate a new education system in the U.S. but also has successfully improved communication and understanding between Boise State University faculty, staff, and refugee students.

### Taking Action

The higher education community is, now more than ever before, in a prime position to secure protections and opportunities for students who are in vulnerable situations. The international community acknowledges this, and actions being taken range from global to the local:

- Internationally: specifically and with regard to the recognition of academic qualifications, UNESCO (2017)<sup>18</sup> is reviewing

and finalizing a Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education which includes a special provision for refugees.

- Regionally: At the regional level, the council of Europe has led the new European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which verifies higher education credentials of refugees who lack necessary documentation through an individualized assessment on their qualifications.<sup>19</sup>
- Nationally: In the U.S., refugee students missing necessary documentation have been reviewed on a case-by-case basis. One of the examples can be found at the University of Colorado Boulder with Ryerson University in Toronto, which developed limited policies in working with refugee students who do not have full credentials.<sup>20</sup>

To reiterate Ms. Feldmann's above call to action: by hosting a displaced or refugee student, your institution is actively contributing to the UNHCR Global Compact for Refugees. You are not merely supporting an individual student, you are supporting their families and their host and home communities. You are finding a local solution to a global challenge. Moreover, such change will have a positive impact and create a ripple effect on a local and global scale.<sup>21</sup>

In order to create policies and programs that work for all, we must work together. We must acknowledge and leverage our vast well of resources to combat unfair barriers to education. This takes courage,

images/0025/002530/253046e.pdf  
19 Council of Europe (2019). European Qualification Passport for Refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>  
20 Loo, B. (2016). Recognizing refugee qualifications: Practical tips for credential assessment. New York: World Education Service (WES). Retrieved from <https://knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-recognizing-refugee-credentials.html>  
21 Sadikovic, B. (2017). Higher Education: The Impact on Bosnian Women Who Came as Refugees to the United States. Boise State University Theses and Dissertations. 1277. <https://doi.org/10.18122/B2913W>

creativity, and collaboration. We must also create policies *with and for* refugees, who act as bridges between communities, and are eager to contribute and exercise their progressive capital.<sup>22</sup> Organizations such as the BSRA, whose mission is to raise awareness at the university and community level about the struggles refugee students face in pursuing higher education, are key to holding communities and institutions accountable for providing displaced students an equitable opportunity to pursue their dream of obtaining an education.

Recognizing our moral imperative to take action on behalf of those whose education has been interrupted by conflict<sup>23</sup> and rallying the vast resources of universities and colleges to the cause, a diverse group of academics, practitioners, and policymakers has established a new HEI-led consortium, the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM). Dr. Colleen Thouez, Director of the Welcoming and Integration Division at Open Society Foundations (OSF) and this multisectorial group of dedicated colleagues have officially launched UARRM in July of 2018 as an HEI-led network of migrants, refugees, student associations, the Academy, education think tanks, local governments, ecumenical education institutions, and the international community (e.g., United Nations agencies), and seeks to harness and leverage the resources of the HEI community by addressing six "Action Areas."<sup>24</sup> Action Area 2 in particular recognizes that HEIs and their partners can and must craft policies and create initiatives that

22 *Progressive capital*, coined by Dr. Belma Sadikovic, is a form of social capital, unique to resettled refugee populations, once healthily integrated take on active leadership roles as cultural brokers and role models by actively participating and "giving back" across multiple communities.  
23 The UARRM was originally conceived by Dr. Colleen Thouez in 2016, during her tenure as Senior Advisor to UNITAR.  
24 UARRM website. (2018). Action Areas. Retrieved from: [uarrm.org/actionareas](http://uarrm.org/actionareas)

will reduce or alleviate barriers to higher education. The following sections support this Action Area. We urge you to consider these varying perspectives, challenges, and recommendations.

### Section Summaries

In "Scholar Perspective", Chelsea Blackburn Cohen and James King provide insight on the challenges faced by displaced scholars and the need for the university/institutions to protect scholars and academic freedoms. They offer historical context, scholar experiences and testimonials, and case examples, as well as a cross-section of current initiatives in the field illustrating the role HEIs can play in helping the uprooted populations.

In "Student Section," George Batah, Demetria Charlifue, Nele Feldmann, Jane Roche, and Belma Sadikovic share the perspectives of undergraduate and graduate students from refugee and at-risk migrant backgrounds -- students who have fled persecution or conflict zones and have been resettled as refugees in the U.S., are seeking asylum, or have F1 visas. They dream of becoming psychologists, data analysts, civil engineers, and nanophysicists - hoping to apply their skills to help rebuild their home countries, support their families, and serve their host communities. These stories shed light on the varying needs of displaced students, as well as best practices for HEIs.

In the third section, "Institutional Perspective," Staci Bernhard, Stacey Gustavson, Jeannine Bell, Erin K. Crom, and Bren Tooley highlight challenges faced by practitioners working with displaced students in vulnerable situations. The authors discuss the importance of supporting access to higher education for vulnerable and displaced students, and how institutions can do so more effectively. They

provide specific institutional cases, actions taken, and lessons learned.

Finally, in the "Recommendations" section, Julia Funaki, Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert, Denise Jillions, Bryce Loo, and Zachary Holochwost offer a practical toolkit of available methodologies for institutions to employ when working with displaced and vulnerable students. Each recommended practice includes an action plan and sample policies for institutions, using case studies and sample scenarios developed in close consultation with colleagues. Each practice is designed to help institutions recognize student credentials and provide equitable opportunities for enrollment.

12 Streitwieser, B. & Taylor, M. (2016, August 19). Credentialing procedures for migrants seeking entrance to German higher education. International Enrollment Management Spotlight, 13.(2)/NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

13 J. Kirk. (2009). Certification counts: Recognizing the learning attainments of displaced and refugee students. International Institute for Education Planning: UNESCO.

14 Streitwieser, B., Loo, B., Ohorodnik, M., & Jeong, J. (2018). Access for Refugees Into Higher Education: A Review of Interventions in North America and Europe. Journal of Studies in International Education, 1028315318813201.

15 Ibid.

16 Streitwieser, B., Loo, B., Ohorodnik, M., and Jeong, J. (2018, Spring). Access to higher education for refugees: A review of interventions in North America and Europe. George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development Dean's working paper Series.

17 Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education in countries of first asylum: Breaking open the black box of pre-resettlement experiences. Theory and Research in Education, 14(2), 131-148.

18 UNESCO. (2017). A preliminary draft of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in UNESCO Executive Progress Report Paris: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation). Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/>

# 02

## Scholar Perspectives

Dr. Chelsea A. Blackburn Cohen  
James R. King

Source: Getty Images

# Perspective I: Scholars in Exile

## Introduction

It is difficult to underestimate the devastation caused by conflict and political instability around the world. In recent years, such turmoil has transformed the lives of people in places like Syria and Yemen, whose roots to their home country have been unearthed. Further, cultural institutions and traditions have been demolished or erased. Included in this erasure is the loss of knowledge—a grave concern and interest of this paper. As devastating as these losses are, knowledge faces threats beyond conditions of instability and war.

In an era where the global economy is overwhelmingly driven by knowledge, knowledge itself has become more contested than ever. Whether knowledge is disputed inside the classroom, across political landscapes, within peer-reviewed journals, in opinions expressed through guest lectures, social media, or op-eds, the freedom of ideas has become contingent not only across space and time, but also on the content of the knowledge being shared, by whom, and for what audience. This, by no means, is a minor threat.

In the latest iteration of Scholars at Risk's (SAR) annual *Free to Think* report, approximately 300 attacks on higher education communities across 47 countries were chronicled between September 1, 2017 and August 31, 2018 (SAR, 2018). These attacks most often included instances of wrongful imprisonment, killings, violence, disappearances, and prosecution. Many of the attacks occurred in countries experiencing extremism, conflict, and political instability such as Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. Attacks on higher education are not only occurring in countries suffering from

conflict and instability or where academic freedom has long been disrespected. Increasingly, these attacks are occurring in considerably more democratic spaces in countries such as the United States (SAR, 2018).

Particularly as countries with sizeable higher education systems suffer from large-scale conflict and displacement, the international community is seeing unprecedented numbers of displaced and threatened university students and professionals. Syria, for example, once boasted one of the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region's largest higher education systems. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 26% of Syrian young people (including young women) were participating in tertiary education on the eve of the conflict (UNESCO UIS, 2011). War, however, has decimated the country's university system, and amongst the millions of Syrian refugees, there are thousands of academics and tens of thousands of university students (Watenpaugh, Fricke, & King, 2014).

Syria faces a higher education emergency, in addition to a humanitarian crisis. And it is not just Syria. There are also higher education emergencies in Venezuela, Yemen, and elsewhere, resulting in large numbers of refugees who are academics and university-eligible students. This is reflected in the application trends to SAR and the Scholar Rescue Fund (SRF) of the Institute of International Education (IIE). Across both organizations in recent years, applications from scholars seeking protective placements were most salient from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Venezuela, and Yemen.

This field of higher education in emergencies—for which IIE



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now has a specific division—will only become more urgent. Historically, neither the humanitarian nor the higher education communities placed significant emphasis on providing opportunities for university-age or academic refugees in particular, with some notable exceptions. That has changed, and it was the displaced Syrian students and scholars themselves who pushed higher education into the conversations about refugee needs and humanitarian response.

#### **Freedoms Afforded by the Academy: Historical Analysis**

Though the scale of the threats against academics globally is unprecedented, the problem is not new. To better understand the changing context of higher education institutions and their response, important lessons can be drawn from history, particularly when considering higher education's relationship with and response to a global crisis of a comparable scale. In 1924, amidst the aftermath of the First World War, the Institute of Social Research was founded in Frankfurt, Germany with an orientation toward critical theory and Weberian and Marxist traditions (Crotty, 1998). Later renamed as the Frankfurt School, this historical institution was shaped by the thinking

and collaboration of some of the most influential modern critical theorists, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, and Henryk Grossman, among others (Crotty, 1998).

Many of the first members of the Institute of Social Research in Germany were Jews and/or Marxists who had little hope of survival once Hitler was appointed Chancellor and the Institute closed in 1933 (Crotty, 1998). It was at this time that their U.S. colleague Alvin Johnson established a University in Exile in New York as a “rescue operation” for the refugee scholars fleeing Germany (Lowenberg, 2006). Horkheimer led other core members of the Institute to New York, where they were able to resume their work (Crotty, 1998). Likewise, IIE appointed Edward Murrow to spearhead the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars, which, in 1933, voted for funds for the support of displaced academics to twenty universities in the United States (Edgcomb, 1993). The Emergency Committee ran from 1933-1945 and supported over 330 scholars from several European countries at over 150 institutions.

The position of the New School and IIE's Emergency Committee in the United States presented

a geographical advantage to addressing the dangers that afflicted émigré scholars and the crises that resulted from the Second World War. By 1944, over 133,000 German Jewish émigrés found refuge in the United States; among them, nearly 2,500 were academics (Moser, Voena, & Waldinger, 2014). According to a Rockefeller Foundation report on its Special Aid Fund for Deposed Scholars 1933-1939, no accurate estimates of this displacement exist, although at that time it was largely considered to be unprecedented in academic history.

The impact made by the émigré scholars on American academe and social and political life is far reaching (Katznelson, 2009). Not only did their attention to the threat fascism posed to democracy awake the political imaginations of academics in the 1930s, displaced scholars brought on the development of a critical theory of society from a neo-Marxist point of view, significantly influencing the field of political theory and political sociology as a whole (Blackburn Cohen, 2018; Loewenberg, 2006).

Even still, exiled scholars of the period impacted lives and the social realities of those far beyond the ivory tower. While some of these more well-known displaced scholars

found intellectual homes at prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, many others gained academic employment in the nation's under-resourced southern and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Edgcomb, 1993). This shift, moving from their non-whiteness and oppression in Europe to that of the perceived white oppressor in the segregated south precipitated a massively important cultural, political, racial, and intellectual moment in history. For many of these scholars, their resistance and activity as political agents within the walls of segregated institutions broadened to a politics of anti-white supremacy, and contributed to cross-cultural understanding in American society amidst a painfully divided world (Duggan & Drury, 1948; Edgcomb, 1993).

#### **Freedoms Afforded by the Academy: The Contemporary Landscape**

Institutions such as colleges and universities inhabit a special place in modern and historical civilization. As such, higher education institutions are often discussed in terms of their susceptibility to a variety of external and internal pressures, and thus reflect changes occurring in larger society. How can the consideration of the historical and contemporary

freedoms afforded by the academy inform policies that promote inclusion of and agency among displaced populations?

First, it is imperative to consider how the last two decades have marked a major change for higher education institutions throughout the world. Much of the discourse focusing on the contemporary transformations of higher education emphasizes its relevance in a society dominated by information, commonly referred to as the knowledge economy (Scott, 2006). This shift is vastly important. The changing nature of labor and the economy has fueled dramatic shifts from production to information, and increasingly, from knowledge to credentials (Altbach, 2016). These transformations are also evident in that in 1992 only five national systems had gross tertiary education enrollment rates above 50 percent. By 2012, over 54 national systems had surpassed the 50 percent rate (Marginson, 2016, p. 247).

Brought on through the era of globalization, these changes are largely referred to as the internationalization of higher education. The internationalization of higher education, defined by Knight (2015), refers to the process of “integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions

or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2). Yet this international engagement is in need of scrutiny. The rise of a globalization era has fostered a competitive market environment for institutions around the world. Engagement of this type through standard internationalization strategies values activities that can quantify their ends to remain competitive in global rankings systems that this era has itself produced.

Though the internationalization of higher education continues to be considered a contemporary phenomenon from a U.S. perspective, it has historical roots. Scholars and students alike share long histories of intellectual knowledge sharing and travel between institutions since their founding. These exchanges are arguably more important today than ever. Preserving and offering access to higher education for displaced populations is essential in rebuilding unstable regions, maintaining a vast knowledge community, and defending the intellectual and civil freedoms distinctively afforded by these institutions (Goodman & Angelson, 2013).

Universities are in a unique position to help displaced populations contribute to and pursue higher education. Higher education institutions “have the ability to bypass bureaucratic



inefficiencies, prioritize [certain] applications and provide facilities” for students, professors, and their families (Magaziner, 2015, p. 9). The most important resource for empowering lost generations of knowledge is to value and provide space for knowledge sharing. In today’s knowledge economy, it is from within the university that displaced knowledge producers have the agency to craft the narratives of their fate, and in so doing, institutions of higher learning have an unprecedented obligation to shape a just future (Blackburn Cohen, 2018).

### Charting new Terrain: Twenty-First Century Challenges of Academics in Exile

While the contemporary rhetoric surrounding displacement is not so much a departure from a century ago, the economic and societal role of higher education has drastically changed. Unlike the post-World War II period, higher education at present is widely viewed as a necessary investment into individuals’ economic futures. With opponents bemoaning the immediate economic burden of supporting displaced migrants, education remains the primary independent variable for most exiles in reaching economic independence.

Reflecting on his own personal experiences of displacement, Palestinian native and renowned scholar Edward Said (1993) once remarked that “exile is one of the saddest fates” (p. 113). Said goes on to argue that exile is a condition that is not a removal in any sense, but rather caught up in loss and longing, where in today’s world, the despair is not being removed but in living with everyday reminders through media that the old world is not so far away (Said, 1993).

This sense of double-ness plagues the modern exile in countless ways, and necessitates a thoughtful approach toward assistance. Previous work has highlighted some of the most common challenges. These include but are not limited to: mental health and psychosocial needs, including the trauma of displacement; separation and/or suffering of family; social isolation and cultural adjustments; anxiety over an unknown future; adjusting to the academic pressure and demands of a new and unfamiliar academic environment; the lack of appreciation of knowledge, skills, and experience; language barriers; navigating political, racial, and/or ethnic tensions; and more. In what follows, select scholars share their perspectives of exile, with attention toward sharing best practices in higher

education and identifying areas of improvement.

First-hand accounts of the modern experience of exile were solicited from scholars who have received support from the Scholars at Risk network and the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund. Participants include: Scholar A, a scholar of sociology from the Ivory Coast; Scholar B, a scholar of history and political science from Kyrgyzstan; Scholar C, a scholar of political science from Turkey; and Scholar D, a scholar of neuroscience from Syria. These scholars were sought for their contributions based on their willingness to be involved in the creation of this report, as well as their status as scholars who have adjusted and acclimated, over time, to their academic appointments of refuge in North America. What follows is an amalgamation of their perspectives on the successes and challenges of relocating to a U.S. institution, best practices for host universities, the role of U.S. higher education in supporting exiled scholars, and finally, what lessons can be applied—from the scholar experiences—to displaced student populations seeking access to higher education in the United States.

**Challenges.** When asked to reflect upon the biggest challenges they faced

when moving into their host appointments, all of these scholars pointed to the difficulties in adjusting to a new academic culture—more specifically, American academe. Scholar B noted the difficulties in mentally adapting to a new academic environment in the U.S., saying, “There is a vast difference between the American academic world and the Soviet and post-Soviet education systems. I’ve had to thoroughly examine many complex themes and reevaluate my knowledge and experience from different perspectives. Meetings with other relocated scholars convinced me that some of them are trapped by an old mindset and that blocks their ability to improve their skills and obtain new knowledge.”

Other scholars offered similar remarks, noting the complexity of academic bureaucracy, inadequate support from human resources and administrative professionals, and the lack of transparency around the process for seeking funding to support their academic research (a practice that is not conducive to short-term appointments). Likewise, Scholar D articulated the journal impact factor as a measure of scholarly merit that fails to take the conditions of exile into account. Additionally, scholars cited the troubling aspects of their personal and

professional futures remaining uncertain and, unsurprisingly, the language barriers they faced upon arrival to the U.S.

**Successes.** Scholars were also asked to reflect on the people, programs, and services that were the most useful in their adjustment to new academic environments. Overwhelmingly, they identified the “mentor system” as the most important support structure, whereby a seasoned academic at the host institution serves as a mentor for the new scholar, providing both academic and administrative support, as well as orienting them to a new location with its own set of resources and unique character. One scholar distinguished this mentor role from that of a more seasoned displaced academic, who can also offer extraordinarily relevant experience and advice on the experience of displacement and relocation, suggesting the need for an informal network for displaced scholars to relate to one another and share their experiences. Other beneficial programs that were cited include opportunities for scholars to participate in public seminars at other institutions—and likewise, academic conferences—where they are able to broaden their knowledge of U.S. academic life as well as expand their own professional network. Finally,

scholars cited the value of being in regular contact with their assistance providers (in this case, SAR and IIE-SRF).

**Best Practices.** At the core of best practices for hosting displaced populations is integration into the university community. Scholars who reflected on their most positive hosting experiences noted the steps institutions took to ensure their inclusion in many aspects of university life outside their discipline. For example, Scholar A noted how helpful it was to be engaged with university activities within and outside the campus, as well as opportunities to meet and discuss professional goals with provosts and other key administration members. Sharing individual goals enabled others to identify opportunities for teaching, research, and university service and to acclimate to cultural norms in U.S. academia. Likewise, Scholar D noted that systematic approaches of support were most effective when they included all stakeholders, but especially, university administration. Further, access to and participation in educational associations and conferences proved to be excellent opportunities for professional development. In general, best practices—both individual and collective—were largely effective because of the commitment of the individuals providing support





and their willingness to share their connections with the scholar.

**Higher Education and Displacement.** Although the role of higher education in supporting displaced populations is of interest to many, it is principally rooted in one's perspective on the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions toward society. As Scholar A observed, "higher education greatly contributes to the formation and building of a peaceful and democratic society." For Scholar B, a central aim of higher education is to "help youth to be responsible citizens and create a meaningful life." It is then with no surprise that Scholar C situated her experience of displacement and the role of the university as an educational opportunity itself:

"Speaking from my own experience, my displacement is directly related to the radical deterioration in physical, social, and financial grounds to continue one's scholarly reading and writing as well as teaching engagements. Thus, hosting displaced scholars who mainly opt for relocation on foreign lands to be able to write, read, and teach would introduce fresh willingness into the offices, discussion venues, and classrooms. It

would also introduce new perspectives—both theoretical and methodological—for no knowledge is context-less and all knowledge is experiential to a certain extent."

**Lessons for Student Populations.**

Finally, scholars offered their assessment of applicable lessons from their experience as they pertain to displaced student populations, noting the importance of recognizing that "displaced students are the most vulnerable group in at-risk populations." Several scholars cited the need for individualized on-campus mental health services and psychosocial support fluent in the trauma of displacement. Others offered ideas for mentor support, where a displaced student could have both a mentor who is knowledgeable of the student's home country and/or conflict and has some degree of fluency in their native language; and another mentor in the student's area of study who can offer guidance in their academic pursuits. There was a general consensus that universities seeking to support students in exile should have an association or club as an additional support network. Finally, Scholar C warned of the importance of not conflating the at-risk status of a student or scholar with his/her academic potential:

"I also feel it my responsibility to underline that sometimes the balance of eligibility might tend to the reverse side, leading the peer colleagues to undermine the capacity and scholarly achievements of the academics. Thus again, a preliminary orientation would make a significant contribution. More briefly, this would help to offer the grounds to approach a scholar or student at risk not as somehow below the academic standards, thus refraining from turning a 'vulnerable' state into a matter of academic hierarchy."

**Current Initiatives**

Both the Scholars at Risk network and the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund continue to encounter increased demand of their services.

**Placements.** The Scholars at Risk network received over 500 applications for their protective services in the 2017-2018 reporting period, of which 124 scholars were placed in hosting universities around the world (SAR, 2018). The majority of SAR applications came from Turkey, with large numbers across the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. SAR currently handles a caseload of over 700 scholars seeking help.

Similarly, IIE-SRF received more applications for scholar

assistance in 2017 and 2018 than any years since its establishment in 2002 (IIE-SRF, 2018). Nearly three quarters of these applications came from Syria, Turkey, and Yemen. During the past year, IIE-SRF assisted more than 200 scholars from 29 countries, working with 100 partner institutions in 19 countries. This included arranging and co-funding positions at close to 75 higher education institutions globally, with the highest numbers in the U.S., Canada, Germany, Jordan, and Finland.

Governmental partnerships can play a key role in facilitating opportunities for threatened and displaced academics and university students. For example, IIE and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) formalized a partnership in 2016 to jointly support displaced scholars from Iraq, Syria, and later Yemen, at Finnish higher education institutions. During the ensuing two and a half years, four IIE-SRF fellows and two IIE-supported university students have been able to continue their academic work in Finland.

**Trainings and Other Services.** Beyond arranging positions, SAR and IIE-SRF provide scholars with advice, legal referrals, career advisement, and other services. Over 350 SAR-supported scholars benefited from these services

during 2017-2018 academic year alone. In the same period, SAR staff-led training workshops for hosts and scholars reached 162 participants. The trainings share best practices for hosts and prepare scholars to graduate from SAR support by identifying next opportunities, in exile or upon return.

In 2017, IIE-SRF launched the Partnerships for Scholar Advancement (PSA) as a network of partner organizations and individuals committed to providing IIE-SRF fellows with opportunities for career advancement and professional development during and after their IIE-SRF fellowships. Participating scholars are connected to mentors and other services through this network of partners, who provide their expertise in academic and professional writing, career counseling, networking, and legal representation, among other areas.

**Contributing to Home Academic Communities.**

SAR and IIE-SRF recognize the importance of giving displaced scholars the opportunity to continue contributing to their home communities. One such effort is the IIE-SRF Iraq Distance Learning Initiative (DLI). Originally created as part of the Iraq Scholar Rescue Project (2007-2014), in 2018, the initiative

supported IIE-SRF scholars from Iraq to deliver remotely more than 100 live academic lectures and full university courses to 3,000 students, faculty, and professionals at nearly 25 Iraqi institutions.

SAR also provides gap-filling emergency assistance grants. In the 2017-2018 reporting period SAR provided a record number of 45 emergency grants to scholars for in-country needs; travel for interviews, conferences, or to take up new positions; visa fees; legal costs or family support for those detained or facing charges.

As part of the IIE-SRF fellowship, scholars are eligible to receive relocation funding, health insurance coverage, and, in some cases, the opportunity to apply for professional development and language training funds. Additionally, IIE-SRF has available funding for emergency support. IIE-SRF provided 28 IIE-SRF fellows with relocation or emergency support in 2018.



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# 03

## Student Perspectives

George Batah

Demetria Charlifue

Nele Feldmann

Jane Roche

Dr. Belma Sadikovic

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# Perspective II: Displaced Students and Their Allies

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the importance of higher education access from the perspective of both displaced students in vulnerable situations and their allies. As representatives from the Institute of International Education (IIE), EducationUSA, the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM), Syria Youth Empowerment (SYE), and the Boise State Refugee Alliance (BSRA), we have had the honor of working with a population of committed students whose dream is to rebuild their home countries or serve their host communities. Yet - in order for this particular population to fulfill this dream - HEIs must open their doors to them.

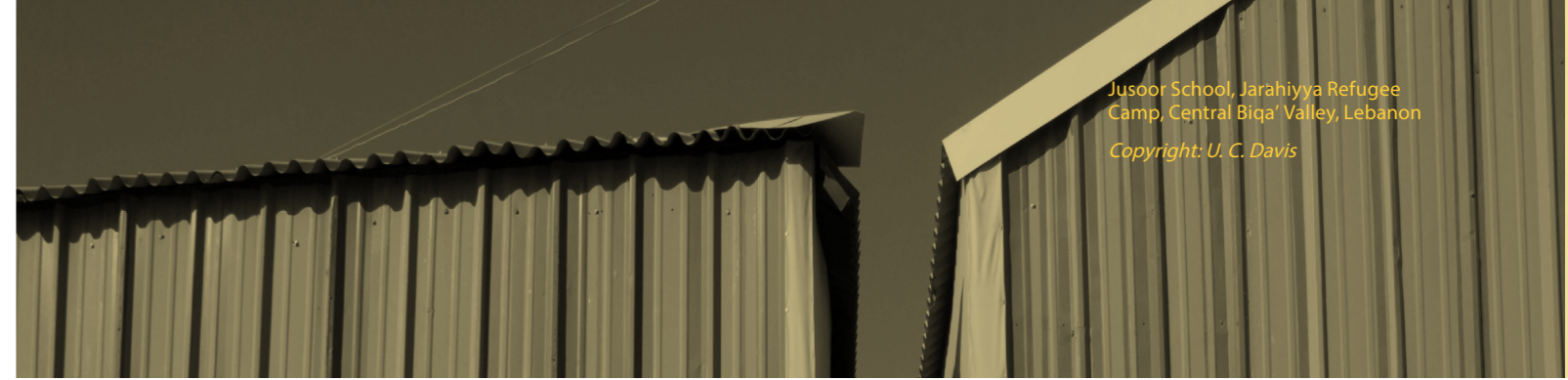
We provide the following case examples based on the stories of undergraduate and graduate students with whom we (or our colleagues) directly work. These are students who have fled from persecution or conflict zones in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Pakistan, Bosnia, and Myanmar, and have been resettled as refugees in the U.S., are seeking asylum, have Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or have F1 visas.<sup>2</sup> Each of them hope to apply their skills to help their rebuild their home countries or serve their host communities. For example, Warda, a Palestinian refugee who grew up in Syria, is a recipient of Jusoor's 100 Syrian Women, 10,000 Syrian Lives scholarship, and is now getting her Master's degree at Columbia University's renowned School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). According to Christina Peebles, Jusoor's Head of Research, Development & Scholarships, Warda and her fellow scholars are "*chosen for their leadership abilities, especially for their plans to contribute to the redevelopment of Syria.*" These and other stories represent a critical class of students to whom higher education professionals must listen.

## Addressing Student Needs and Challenges

A number of challenges exist for displaced students seeking higher education, and for the HEI administrators who want to create pathways for access and success. There are commonalities and differences in the challenges students face, depending on their background; that is, whether their education has been interrupted due to conflict, or they are continuing their education as resettled refugees and are already living in the U.S. Many HEIs, for instance, lack the visa capability to provide F1 or J1 visas, face challenges in getting overseas students without prior education credentials into U.S. colleges, or are prohibited from admitting students due to Presidential Proclamation 9645.

Displaced students also face complex, often inflexible admissions systems. F-1 students from conflict zones frequently lack access to their documentation due to the destruction or closure of schools. Students from certain public schools in Syria are frequently prohibited from obtaining their transcripts due to the political situation there, as you will see in Karam's story, below. In addition, it sometimes proves difficult

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that these conversations are not based on a formal, structured research study. However, our team assured anonymity for those who requested it and received their approval before submitting their testimonials for publication.



Jusoor School, Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon  
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to secure recommendation letters from local teachers, as this is a foreign concept to many from non-western countries. Visa issues add additional access challenges for students whose education has been interrupted. Restrictive visa policies, visa processing fees, long wait times for visa appointments, and high travel costs to visa appointments can be prohibitive for students, and can significantly delay a student's studies.

Students who have been resettled as refugees in the U.S. face different, yet still very daunting challenges in navigating the admissions system, enrolling in classes, and paying for college. Many struggle to choose appropriate colleges for themselves, due to lack of understanding of U.S. campus culture. Others experience language barriers, are unfamiliar with college entrance exams (e.g., TOEFL, SATs, ACTs), or struggle to navigate aspects of the registration process, such as Blackboard. As Patrick's story illustrates, below, refugees often arrive in the U.S. when they are past the age of twenty-one, and cannot attend traditional high school. Their the path to university then becomes much more challenging. Finances are also problematic for students who have been resettled in the U.S. Although these students have access to supports like in-state tuition and federal financial aid, they often struggle to afford basic needs like food and books, sometimes having to work several jobs to make ends meet.

Students who get the opportunity to continue their studies in the U.S. still face a wide range of hurdles upon arrival, ranging from orienting oneself to a new city to paying tuition. Opening bank accounts, navigating transportation systems, university websites, and student facilities can be daunting for newcomers. On top of this, students often lack the financial means to pay for tuition and other expenses. As illustrated in A.Y.'s story, below, F1 and J1 students are unable to access federal financial aid due to lack of residency, and may face additional barriers due to weak financial systems in their home countries (e.g., lack of credit cards to register for classes). They are also still expected to follow their visa requirements including work restrictions, expiration, Optional Practical Training (OPT), and Curricular Practical Training (CTP).

All of the above challenges are frequently compounded by a lack of guidance by or training among institutional staff and admissions counselors regarding refugee and migration issues. There are also bureaucratic and accreditation restrictions among HEIs. But these challenges are by no means insurmountable. There are a number of promising HEI and organizational initiatives at IIE, SYE, edSeed, Jusoor, ONErefugee, Bard College Berlin, and Blue Rose Compass, providing one-on-one guidance, helping to cover tuition expenses, negotiating tuition waivers, or mentoring displaced students in applying for visas or financial support. For example, the IIE Scholarship Fund for Syrian Students in partnership with EducationUSA helps facilitate admission via application fee waivers and visa interview preparation. There are also a number of innovative HEI initiatives responding to the increasingly prohibitive U.S. travel restrictions. In Karam's case, Bard College's international satellite campus in Berlin, Germany took him in when he was unable to travel to the U.S. to continue his studies. Other organizations like Jusoor and Blue Rose Compass have programs tailored to ensuring access for refugee women.

Jusoor School, Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon  
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## Case Examples

**Patrick** (*Bachelor's Student, Boise State University*). Patrick was resettled as a refugee in Boise, Idaho in 2010 when he was 21 years old, after being forced to flee his home in Bukavu, Congo. He is now 29 years old and attends Boise State University (BSU), where he is in his last year in his social sciences program.

*Navigating Admissions and Enrollment Processes.* Patrick pursued his secondary studies at Boise Evening School, as he was past the age limit to attend traditional high school. His intention was to go straight to college after obtaining his high school diploma in 2013, however, he recalls struggling to navigate the complex online application system. It was especially difficult for him to get started due to the language barrier (his native language is French). Patrick also struggled to use Blackboard and navigate the financial aid processes. He remembers, "I was confused and helpless. I ended up spending one more year at home because I couldn't figure out how to register for classes."

In 2014, Patrick met Refik, who is a refugee from Bosnia. Like Patrick, it had taken him nearly two years for him to enroll in school because of the complex enrollment process. After meeting Refik, Patrick realized, "There's someone else who struggled like me. There are many of us." In 2013, Refik and his wife Belma co-founded BSRA, in response to this common problem amongst the Boise refugee community. BSRA is now housed at BSU and works tirelessly to help refugee students apply and enroll in school. BSRA also gave Patrick the one-on-one help he needed, by helping him register for classes

and apply for financial aid.

Patrick encourages other HEIs to implement services similar to BSRA, and also recruit voluntary student "ambassadors" to work one-on-one with incoming students. Such services will help incoming students better navigate the enrollment and financial aid processes, which Patrick points out are complicated even for native-born American students. He adds that these types of services should be widely publicized and carefully targeted to those in vulnerable situations.

*Financial Support.* Patrick is an Idaho resident, so he has largely been able to finance his studies and living expenses through in-state tuition and financial aid. However, his tuition and living expenses are still very expensive, so he has taken out student loans and worked two jobs to help with extra expenses. This year (2018-2019), ONErefugee, an organization based in Utah, paid for everything his financial aid could not cover. Before receiving this funding, he was unable to afford all of his books during the first few weeks of each semester. He says, "I would fall behind from the very beginning." ONErefugee also provides \$100 per semester for on-campus meals. He recalls: "Before I was studying on an empty stomach, and couldn't concentrate." This extra support has played a key role in his recent success in school. Even his grades have improved, he adds.

**Karam** (*Bachelor's Student, Bard Berlin College, Germany*). Karam is originally from Syria. In fall of 2017, he began his studies at Bard College Berlin's branch campus, which offers full undergraduate degree programs. Karam is currently in his third semester

and studies Economics, Politics, and Social Thought. He receives a full tuition waiver from Bard Berlin, as well as a scholarship through the IIE Scholarship Fund for Syrian Students, which covers his living expenses (i.e., room and board, health insurance, and books). Back in Syria, Karam had been one semester shy of graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Petroleum Engineering when he was no longer able to attend school. Karam got arrested by Syrian government forces in 2013 and remained in detention for one year. With ISIS taking control of large parts of Eastern Syria in 2014, Karam felt that he had no choice but to leave his home country. He fled to Turkey in October 2014. Having no source of income, Karam started to work at different INGOs in Turkey. But he realized that his only way to develop professionally and personally was through higher education.

*Application Process.* Karam applied for the IIE Scholarship Fund for Syrian Students in the fall of 2016 while he was in Turkey. He had heard about the scholarship through a friend, who was at the time studying in the United States. The scholarship included placement, a tuition waiver from the host institution, and a stipend to cover living expenses. One of the biggest challenges for Karam was obtaining the required letters of support. His professors in Syria did not respond to his inquires out of fear of being affiliated with his political activism. Eventually, he was able to acquire a recommendation from a previous employer living outside Syria. Karam did not have any difficulties drafting a professional CV and responding to the essay questions, given his previous study and work experience.

*Academic Documentation.* At the time of

his application to the IIE Scholarship Fund for Syrian Students, Karam had both his original transcripts available as well as translations in English. Before his detention, his university had been targeted and many students had lost much or all of their documentation. He knew that one day having his academic transcripts would be very important to continue his studies, so his mother was able to obtain his transcripts. Nevertheless, Karam's university withheld transcripts from his last two semesters because he had been working as a photojournalist and was considered a political activist.

*English Language Testing.* Karam decided to take the IELTS in Istanbul for a fee of \$180. Karam did not experience any issues in taking it, but notes that it is often very challenging for students with limited resources or lack of access to testing facilities to take standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, SAT, ACT). Karam recommends that HEIs consider other ways of verifying language skills such as Duolingo or Skype interviews.

*Visa Application.* Karam was fortunate in that he did not face any challenges in obtaining his visa. Both Bard College Berlin and IIE provided Karam with letters of support outlining the terms and conditions of the scholarship, as well as the financial support he is receiving from both institutions. However, he says that his experience is the exception rather than the rule. As mentioned previously, many students struggle with high visa fees and long wait times.

*Campus Life.* Housing was provided by Bard College Berlin when Karam first arrived in Germany. He did not experience any major difficulties in adjusting to the academic life on campus. Living on-campus also allowed him

to get to know other students. One of Karam's main challenges when arriving on campus was the age difference between himself and the other students. However, he still found Bard College Berlin to be a welcoming environment.

**A.Y.**<sup>2</sup> (*Bachelor's Student, State School in the Pacific Northwest*). A.Y. is a 25 year old student from Syria with Temporary Protected Status (TPS). He arrived in the U.S. in 2013. Right now he is in his senior year of college, where he studies data analytics. He learned about the school from his a family member, who lives in the area. He received an F1 visa after being admitted to the program. The university did not count any of his previous core courses taken toward his program, but counted them as electives only.

*Financial and visa challenges.* Though his transition into U.S. university was relatively smooth, A.Y. has struggled with both financial and visa issues after beginning his coursework. Last year, his family was unable to continue paying for his tuition due to the situation in Syria. As a result, he had to put his studies on hold for one semester, then re-enrolled as a part-time student for two semesters. Unfortunately, he lost his F1 status during this time. He explains, "The university did not know that I could be a part-time student and keep my F-1 status at the same time." He adds that he was also unaware of that he could do both, but found this out when it was too late. Luckily, his TPS status enabled him to stay in the U.S. for the time being, buying him more time to acquire needed funding and apply for residency. A.Y. has been able to regain his full-time student status for his senior year, thanks to funding from a non-profit crowdfunding organization

<sup>2</sup> The student's name and school have been withheld at his request to protect his privacy.

called edSeed and VIP.fund's Ammar Alshami Scholarship. He also just claimed state residency, and will therefore be eligible for in-state tuition for his last semester.

*Support.* Though his story has a happy ending, the financial and visa challenges he faced have been highly stressful for him. He recalls feeling like he was in limbo during this time, which was all the more difficult because he was so far away from his parents. Thankfully, A.Y. receives a great deal of support from the international student office, from his business fraternity, and from university counseling services.

**Sum Pi** (*Bachelor's Student, University of Texas, Arlington*). Sum Pi was born in Myanmar, and fled to Malaysia as a refugee. He completed high school at a public institution in Myanmar and completed his GED in Malaysia through a United Nations' sponsored program. He came to the U.S. on refugee status, then later applied for permanent residence. He is now an active green card holder and is an undergraduate student at University of Texas, Arlington, where he studies civil engineering. Prior, Sum completed his two-year associates degree at Richland Community College.

Sum Pi relocated to Dallas, Texas from Florida because he had two Myanmar friends in the city- one of whom allowed Sum Pi to move in with him and another who coached him through the college application process. Sum Pi lived closest to Richland Community College and chose to apply there. All that was required of him for the application was the Texas Success Initiative exam that included math, reading, and writing portions. He noted how challenging the English portions of the test were, but he passed the test. Next,





Sum's Myanmar friend helped him with the community college application process, which was difficult due to his limited English ability. "I didn't even know where to start with the application. Every time I had a question about the application I would text my friend and ask."

Sum began at Richland with very limited working-English ability, "my classes were very difficult, I didn't understand the lectures at all. Writing essays and participating in class discussions were very hard. I did not have to take an ESL class, but was expected to pass my English Composition 101 class." Sum Pi was not aware of campus support resources or supplementary English assistance that were available to him at his community college. Prior to this, Sum Pi's only exposure to English was through English classes run by the UN in Malaysia. Collegiate English proficiency assessments of refugee and at-risk migrants' English abilities vary based on the student's immigration status. In most cases, if a student passes the baseline of standardized admissions exams, they will be admitted and prompted to enroll in English 101 and other English-heavy coursework. Many vulnerable students struggle with language barriers in their first-year coursework.

Despite the challenges, Sum Pi completed his associates degree and knew he wanted to pursue a Bachelor's degree in civil engineering immediately. He notes: "The application process was easier than trying to decide which school to go to. I wish I had more guidance here." There were two schools in the Dallas area with civil engineering programs, University of Texas at Arlington and Southern Methodist University. Despite being awarded a 50%

scholarship from Southern Methodist University, he ultimately chose UT Arlington. When asked what he wished he had known before applying to university in the States, he states:

"I wish I knew about the cost of studies and what scholarships to apply for. I chose to go to UT Arlington because I was scared about Southern Methodist University's expensive private school tuition, however, with the scholarship they offered, I think the costs would have evened out to what I'm paying now."

Sum Pi is not working at the moment, and is living off of his student loans. He is doing well at UT Arlington's civil engineering program and has his sights set on pursuing his Master's next.

**Aadan** (*Bachelor's Student, Macalester College*).<sup>3</sup> Aadan is originally from Somalia, but grew up in the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya. Aadan is currently in his sophomore year at a private liberal arts college in Saint Paul, Minnesota called Macalester College, where he receives a full scholarship, studies computer science and physics, and holds an F1 visa.

Aadan was already in the U.S. when he applied to Macalester College because he was studying at United World College (UWC)'s campus in New Mexico.<sup>4</sup> But Aadan's path to higher education was nevertheless a long and arduous one. Blue Rose Compass (BRC), which is a U.S.-based non-profit organization<sup>5</sup> that sponsors and provides scholarships to top students in refugee camps, recruited him directly while

<sup>3</sup> His name has been changed at the student's request, due to security/privacy reasons.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uwc.org/uwerefugeeinitiative>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bluerosecompass.org/mission/>

he still in Kenya, and worked with UNHCR to help him apply for a UWC scholarship. Aadan and his family were apprehensive at first because they had neither heard of BRC nor UWC before. He recalls, "I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into." But after several calls with the staff, he and his family grew confident that BRC was the right sponsor for him, and that UWC was the right school.

The main challenge during the application process was the lack of Internet access in the camp. He remembers, "Sometimes I had to walk for 10 kilometers to the [UNHCR] compound on hot and sunny days in order to do the online application." Lorna Solis, who is the founder of BRC (and is now his legal guardian), coordinated with UNHCR to help Aadan get Internet access. She personally walked him through the application and their requirements through Skype. After completing the application process, Aadan received a full scholarship to UWC and later to Macalester College.

*Documentation and Visa Process.* BRC helped address a number of bureaucratic challenges he faced during the visa process, and worked with the UNHCR and its partners like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to get him his travel documents and visa. It took one year and some months to get him out of Dadaab refugee camp. After receiving the scholarship, it was nearly impossible for him to obtain travel documents from UNHCR since he did not have a passport. He recalls, "With what felt like a journey of many years, it became my routine to travel to UNHCR offices in the camps." With BRC's assistance, it took him one year to finally get the travel documents he needed. On getting the document to travel out of the

camp, UNHCR flew him from the camp to Nairobi, Kenya where the embassy is located, for the visa interview. He thought that he would be able to go back to the camps to say goodbye to his family after the interview, but laments, "I had to stay in Nairobi and fly to the States without saying goodbye to my family. This event played a role in my emotional challenges in the US." He adds, "BRC also paid for my flights and dealt with a horrible ordeal of British Airways not allowing me to board the flight at Nairobi Airport since they thought I would ask for asylum at Heathrow which is where I would then connect to the flight to the US."

*Post-Arrival and Adjusting to Campus Life.* BRC coordinated closely with both UWC-USA and later Macalester College to ensure that he was adjusting well to both campuses, and to see whether or not he needed tutoring. BRC also bought him a laptop, clothes, and sends him a monthly stipend, so there is no need for him to work to finance his studies and living expenses. In addition, they connected him with a peer mentor who was very well-known in Dadaab for being the first student from the camps to attend Princeton University. Aadan remembers, "It was a dream come true for me to talk to and get advice from him."

It was difficult for Aadan to decide on the right field of study. He says, "I grew up with the mentality of wanting to be an engineer." In Dadaab, engineering and medicine are the only two professions that are known since there is little exposure to other fields of study. However, after getting exposed to other fields, it was hard to decide his career path. Now, he says, "I am studying Computer Science which is what I want and will be able to have a career soon so I can help my family back home."

Aadan has dealt with severe emotional stress due to losing family members while he was in school, which has at times affected his school performance at Macalester College. He has also carries a tremendous sense of guilt because he gets to live "the good life" while his family struggles. He laments, "The idea of losing other members of my family and not being able to see them ever again could not leave my head. I was not able to focus at all on my education." After his school threatened to suspend him, BRC communicated with the school officials, appealed the suspension, explained the situation, and connected him with the school's Imam for emotional support. The school accepted the appeal and reinstated him with a list of requirements he would have to meet. BRC became even more engaged with him academically and emotionally and since then his academic performance has significantly improved a great deal. He beams, "I just received my grades and got all A's and B's." Aadan says he feels very lucky to be a BRC participant. He says, "[BRC is] now like my family."

**Belma** (*Former Undergraduate and Graduate Student, Boise State University*). Belma, a child of war, escaped her native city of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on January 7, 1993. At that time she was eight years old and had just barely started second grade. Needless to say, Belma abruptly ended her education in Bosnia and fled with her mother to Stuttgart, Germany, which led to a significant gap in education due to not speaking the German language. Almost seven years later, after making Germany her new home, where she made her first true friendships, Belma's family received a deportation letter in the Summer of 1999, as they only held a temporary visa. Not being able to return

back to their native country, Belma's parents applied for permanent residency as refugees in the United States. After an intense vetting process, the entire family was granted permanent resettlement to Boise, Idaho in December of 2000.

During the first few months in Boise, Belma attended a language academy from which she graduated quickly due to her English proficiency, and was able to attend a regular high school. Despite having learned British English in Germany, Belma struggled with her new environment at her new high school. It was very difficult to make friends due to her accent. Belma recalled: American students didn't want to hang out with me, or sit next to me at the cafeteria because I looked and smelled funny. And because at lunch, I ate my french fries with mayonnaise. Which is what kids do in Germany!" Belma recalls facing a lot of cultural stress and struggled to navigate the American school system. In 2003, with a lot of strategic support from her study skills teacher, Mr. B., Belma was accepted to Boise State University, where she completed her Bachelor's degree in German Literature and Language in 2007. However, navigating college came with its own unique struggles. Everything, from registering for classes her the first semester to figuring out the campus, to realizing during senior year that there was an academic adviser available on campus for students. By then, through trial and error, Belma learned what courses are necessary to take to earn her Bachelor's degree. Needless to say she took several courses that were not required for her major, graduating with twenty-five more credits than the required 128 credits required for her degree. Belma also found out about a steep credit overload fee that she needed to pay, when she took 21





credits one semester to keep up with classes.

Her master's in Education in English as a Second Language, which she earned in 2009, came a little easier than her Bachelor's degree but that was because she was familiar with the U.S. higher education system. This time, Belma made sure to consult with her program advisers every time she had a question regarding her courses, and everything went seamless. However, there were still things related to the culture of higher education she didn't know and that was the ability to join and participate in a student group. Belma says that she was so busy going to school full-time while also working a full-time job outside of school to help her parents make ends meet, that she didn't spend much time on campus aside from going to classes and therefore didn't realize that there were student groups and other student organized activities available until she was going back to college to earn her Master's degree.

In 2017, Belma was awarded her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with the emphasis on Multicultural and Refugee/Migration Studies in Education. During her doctoral studies, became heavily involved in refugee advocacy in Boise and acted as a cultural broker and liaison between the institution and the refugee community, supporting refugees bridge into higher education. On campus, Belma helped newly incoming refugee students how to register for classes, showed them where they should go to apply to scholarships and financial aid, she also helped them connect with an academic adviser, etc. By word of mouth, more students found out about Belma, and more students from refugee backgrounds started reaching out to her. At one time,

Belma remembers helping more than twelve students on campus and several students in high school to enroll into college. Stemming from the needs that the refugee students had, which appeared to be the same needs Belma had when she went through her undergraduate studies, Belma felt the need to establish a student lead group to support refugee students to pursue their dream to go to college and receive an education. In 2013, along with her husband Refik Sadikovic who was also a former refugee from Bosnia, they established the Boise State Refugee Alliance (BSRA), on campus. Today, Belma is an assistant professor at Minnesota State University Moorhead and she is active researching ways to provide equitable opportunities to refugee students in k-12 and higher education as well as being a refugee advocate who has also lived the refugee experience.

**Warda** (*Graduate Student, Columbia University*). Warda, a Palestinian who grew up in Syria, is a recipient of Jusoor's "100 Syrian Women 10,000 Syrian Lives" scholarship and the 2018 IIE PEER Travel Grant. She is one of the few Syrians who has been granted a visa exception under Presidential Proclamation 9645, due to holding a Palestinian travel document that functions as an exempt nationality.

Columbia University and Jusoor provided full-funding for Warda's study and living expenses. Through coordinated efforts by Jusoor and the EducationUSA Syria Adviser, Columbia School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) waived their TOEFL and GRE requirements for Warda, in addition to waiving both the SIPA application fee and the I-20 application processing fee. Throughout the application process, Warda

received individualized assistance from an admissions liaison to help her fill out her application, but the intricacies of the application process were still difficult to work through.

When applying for the IIE PEER Travel Grant, Warda found that the application website was blocked for her. Using different computers and/or a VPN client did not work either. This is a repeated challenge for applicants residing in Syria. Initially, IIE PEER considered accepting Warda's application in PDF format, but alternatively the EducationUSA Syria Adviser filled out the application on Warda's behalf. Later, Nele Feldmann was able to provide a series of alternate domains that allowed Warda to access the site. These joint efforts culminated in Warda receiving the Travel Grant.

Due to various bureaucratic delays in the summer months, Warda ultimately missed her SIPA orientation and subsequently her class registration. The number of steps and level of coordination needed from multiple parties to allow Warda to apply for her visa was a slow process. Delays included: bureaucratic coordination for Jusoor to finalize Warda's contract, slow I-20 processing and delivery times, coordination to have a Lebanon-based friend pay Warda's visa fees, and long wait times for visa appointments at Embassy Beirut.

When Warda finally arrived to the U.S. she was picked up from the airport by a fellow Jusoor scholarship recipient, which was a relief since this was her first time out of the country. At campus an adviser helped coordinate her class registration and put her in touch with other international students to help with the transition. Warda recalls still

having to rely heavily on a friend she knew living in Florida who had recently navigated similar higher education challenges and the American experience. Looking back, Warda wishes she had received more support learning how to open a bank account, how to navigate NYC transportation, how the university website works, and the facilities available to students.

**Hourie** (*Graduate Student, Rutgers University*). Hourie is a Palestinian refugee who was born in and grew up in Ein-El Helwe camp for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. In 2009, she was awarded a scholarship to study at the Lebanese International University where she received her Bachelor's degree in Graphic Design in 2012. In 2012, she received her Bachelor's degree at Lebanese International University (LIU), where she studied graphic design. She is currently a PhD candidate at Rutgers University-Newark's Division of Global Affairs (DGA) program, where she studies refugee integration issues. She finances her studies through a Research Fellowship, and earns a stipend by working fifteen hours per week on campus. She holds an F1 visa, which is valid for 3 years, as well as an I-20 form, which is valid until she finishes her PhD in 2023. Her dream after she completes her PhD is to work on projects that help refugees integrate into their host communities, at an NGO or on the international policy level.

At the time of her application to Rutgers, Hourie was living in Malta because she has family there. She was also obtaining an Advanced Diploma in Marketing from Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST), which she completed in 2017. She then got the opportunity to study in the U.S. when she met the Kyle Farmbry, the Dean of Rutgers GSN, when he was doing research

on xenophobia in Malta in 2016. She says, "*I wasn't planning to apply - it just happened. But in Lebanon, we have a view that a U.S. degree is the best. You just can't say no.*"

Hourie's overall experience with applying to Rutgers was generally a positive one, especially since, as an international program, it is flexible in its assessment of foreign education credentials (for instance, they waive the GRE requirement if an applicant has not taken it). She was also able to receive a recommendation letter from the President of Malta, due to her work with Spark 15. However, she did struggle with the personal essay portion of the application because she had no previous experience with writing one. She did not know what a personal essay was supposed to entail, but was able to ask a friend to help her brainstorm on ideas.

The biggest barrier she faced during the application process was the IELTS exam, mainly due to associated expenses. In Malta, the IELTS preparation course is 1200 euros, while the exam fee itself is 200 euros. She says that most non-native speakers from low-income backgrounds "won't have extra money to pay for the exam or preparation course. All of our extra income goes to paying rent." This problem is so widespread that she decided to take matters into her own hands. She founded Spark 15, which is the first and only refugee youth-led NGO in Malta that advocates for higher education rights. Spark 15 hit a major milestone in 2016 when they created a free IELTS preparation program for low-income migrants and refugees, in partnership with local NGOs and individual professors at the University of Malta.

*Visa process.* Hourie's experience with obtaining a visa to the U.S. was relatively

smooth, due to the dedicated support she received from the international office at Rutgers. She says, "*[The staff] was very helpful - they followed up with me step-by-step; emailing instructions, forms, and links until I got the visa interview.*"

*Post-arrival and Adjusting to Campus Life.* When she first arrived, Hourie attended a two-week long international student program to help newcomers adjust to the academic culture, and to assess the speaking and writing skills of non-native English speakers. To pass the program she was required to write and present on a specific topic, and participate in an oral interview to assess whether or not non-native speaking students needed supplementary English language courses. Sometimes international office would email saying we are going hiking, going to the mall - didn't go. setting up phone, bank account - friend helped. Her personal network also helped with orienting around town. Rutgers GSN helped Hourie apply for and obtain on-campus housing.

Hourie's first year at Rutgers was an overall positive experience, but she says there was a learning curve with the graduate course load. She explains, "*Before I was in marketing, which was more exam based. Here there is so much reading and writing papers.*" Adding to this difficulty is the language barrier. She laments that her UNWRA program in Lebanon did not prepare her for this level of English. She admits, "*The English I know now, I learned on my own.*" During her first year at Rutgers, Hourie was fortunate in that she was able to rely on her personal connections to help proofread her work. But last semester, she says, "*I didn't have to have anyone proofread. My writing is not perfect, but it has gotten better...With all the papers assigned, we get*





so much practice.”

Hourie also experienced problems with navigating Blackboard. She recalls that before classes started, she received an email from her teacher announcing the readings were posted, but did not say where or how to access them. Hourie says, “The professor assumed we knew they were on Blackboard. But not all of us did.”

Hourie’s main recommendation is that U.S. universities designate a specific point person or caseworker for students from disadvantaged backgrounds during the whole application process, to check in periodically or answer any questions related to the process.

**Aslam** (*Graduate Student, Rutgers University-Newark*). Aslam, originally from Pakistan, is currently a PhD student at Rutgers-Newark, where he studies Global Affairs. His highest level of education is a Master’s degree, which he completed at the University of San Diego in California. Aslam finished high school in the native country. Due to an unstable political situation, fearing for his safety, Aslam has applied for political asylum in the U.S., which is currently pending. Thinking back about his experience of applying to university in the U.S., he struggled with identifying the right host institution and also faced challenges with the application process, such as navigating the online application systems and paying application fees, drafting a professional CV and college essays; gathering letters of support, and fulfilling language requirements. Moreover, Aslam faced, and still faces, the financial strains resulting from filing legal paperwork as an asylum seeker. When he arrived on

campus, he struggled with finding housing and with learning about the campus support available to international and domestic students. This unfamiliar environment and culture prevented Aslam from successfully navigating the facets of education. To address these challenges, he met with the head of the department in person who guided him through the process.

Aslam received a Fulbright for his master’s, so the U.S. State Department took care of the visa process. He did not need a visa for his Ph.D. Right now (for the year 2018-2019). Prior to enrolling at Rutgers-Newark, Aslam worked as many as three minimum wage jobs to support his new life in New Jersey. Currently, Aslam finances his studies through a full scholarship. He also works as a tutor to help finance his studies and living expenses. However, at times, Aslam struggled with whether he deserved “this” referring to his education and opportunities in the United States because he was not a U.S. citizen.

Aslam says he had an excellent support system at the University of San Diego. The chair of the department and the staff were very cooperative. They were sensitive to the challenges international students face in the beginning. Aslam recalls a student from the university picking him up from the airport. He says, “just knowing they had empathy for me helped. Then, with time I made friends and adjusted.” Aslam recalls visiting the university’s website for international students often, especially at the early stages of his studies, as they provided useful information for students who came to study at the University of San Diego.

### Lessons Learned

*Best Practices for HEIs.* In recent years, HEIs have begun to recognize the access barriers that vulnerable populations encounter, and many have implemented effective institutional reforms to address these needs. Campus advocacy and resources to support vulnerable students must be implemented from the application process through graduation and potential employment. First and foremost, there is a critical need for more scholarships earmarked for students from war-torn countries. IIE PEER’s scholarship database<sup>6</sup> markets partial and full-funding scholarship opportunities for vulnerable students affected by conflict. Financial hardships are the largest barrier to higher education access for these populations, however mitigating financial challenges must begin in the application phase.

Students from conflict areas suffer from limited finances that impact their ability to pay for tuition and deters them throughout the application process. Vulnerable students commonly do not have access to credit cards or payment platforms to pay for application fees, I-20 processing fees, credential evaluations, standardized test registrations, and score report sending. It is recommended that institutions waive application and I-20 processing fees, accept self-reported test scores or scores through an EducationUSA Adviser, and allow students to alternatively prove their finances without completing the CSS Profile (e.g., College Board Certification of Finances). The CSS Profile is an additional barrier that requires a fee and is hard to navigate for students who reside in countries that have suffered

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iie.org/Programs/IIE-PEER>

from grave breakdowns in their financial processes. Additionally, in conflict areas where international institutions have left, students do not have access to in-country standardized test centers and cannot pay registration fees, and it is recommended that universities waive standardized test requirements for impacted students. Hopeful collegiate applicants often have friends pay for their testing and are willing to coordinate high-cost, dangerous travel to neighboring countries that offer standardized testing. This is not recommended. In lieu of standardized testing, institutions should consider alternative means of assessment such as accepting national high school final exams, conducting Skype interviews, or awarding contingent letters of admission based on their first semester grades. If a student is able to pay and access standardized testing, it is recommended that schools provide international students with free virtual courses, training, or online resources since international students often lack the test preparation and advantages that most domestic students benefit from in their curriculums.

HEIs should be aware that displaced students or those residing in conflict areas encounter tremendous difficulty securing counselors and recommenders for their Common App. In many cases, this could be due to any of the following: 1) school officials may be fearful and hesitant to have any connections with American institutions due to the in-country political climate; 2) school officials lack sufficient English skills; 3) school officials have no understanding of the American college application system and are daunted by navigating the application portals for all the reasons above; and 4) students no longer have contact with school officials due to

displacement or conflict. The EducationUSA Syria Adviser has found that many HEIs will allow the EducationUSA Adviser to fulfill the role as counselor or recommender on the Common App for affected students. By utilizing materials from the student, IIE Open Door reports, and World Educational Services reports, the EducationUSA can usually submit robust information about the student and their educational history.

The challenge of evaluating displaced students’ credentials and documentation is omnipresent. Being sympathetic and flexible to students’ individual cases while upholding the integrity of HEI admissions processes is difficult. It is recommended that HEIs rely on resources and toolkits produced by ECE and WES that address how to assess incomplete documentation and higher education credentials in countries in turmoil. It has also proven effective to grow your network of credential evaluator professionals and to reach out to local Embassies and/or EducationUSA for additional guidance, insight, and collaboration.

As seen in the above-mentioned case of Syrian student Warda, HEIs should also be aware that their admissions or scholarship websites may be blocked. Internet censorship varies by country and in Syria is extensive. HEIs should allow impacted students to submit alternative means of application at no disadvantage to them.

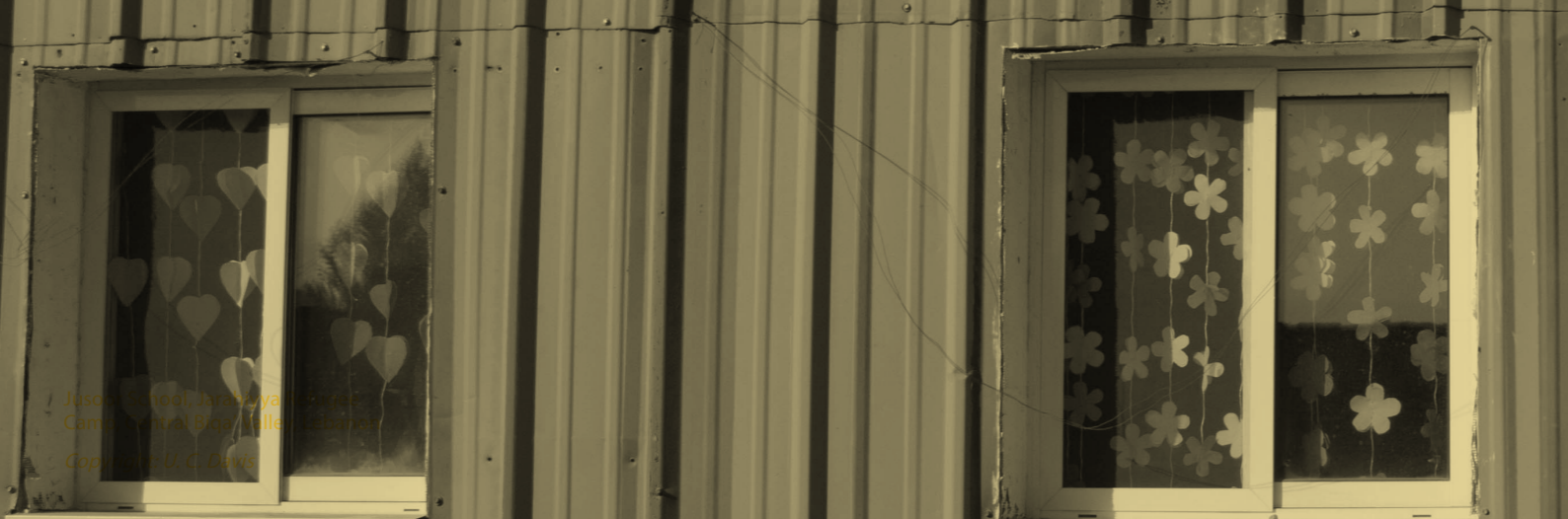
Additionally, in a time when U.S. visas are increasingly hard to secure and are an expensive investment, offering alternative admissions pathways via international satellite campuses can be used to alleviate immigration and cost concerns. Students from conflict areas encounter added challenges

in the visa application process, including high-risk and expensive travel and costly application fees. The 2018 IIE PEER Travel Grant provided funding for students to pay for visa appointments and travel, and addressed this critical, but often unacknowledged, funding need.

Separately, providing access to a variety of on-campus resources and ensuring that staff are well-trained to work with displaced populations throughout the course of their studies is essential. Offering trainings and workshops to staff and peers that work with these students is often neglected, but is critical for the wellbeing, success, and retention of vulnerable populations. Campuses should provide free psychosocial support, legal counseling, and peer support programs to affected students, and ensure that students are well-aware of the resources available to them. Additionally, providing guidance on internships, OPT, and pathways to postgraduate employment must be offered. Furthermore, campuses with displaced students have found that students often have no choice but to stay on-campus during holiday breaks. It is recommended that especially during extended breaks, campuses pursue designating dorms to stay open, ensure access to dining facilities or meals services, or facilitate local host family placements for affected students.

*Best Practices Through Local and Institutional Partnerships.* UARRM’s mandate to support vulnerable populations’ access to higher education through widespread collaboration across multiple sectors affirms the importance and need to form institutional, global networks. This model of including migrants, refugees, student associations, the Academy, education





think tanks, legislators, local government, ecumenical education institutions, and the international community reinforces the importance of mobilizing a diverse body of actors. Increased institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration at the global level is needed to best support vulnerable student populations. It is important to engage with NGOs non-profit organizations, many of whom provide dedicated, long-term, one-on-one support. Blue Rose Compass, for instance, does not merely provide scholarships and sponsorship, but instead functions almost like caseworkers, sometimes, as in Aadan's case, becoming their legal guardians. Aadan even adds "they are like his family." BRC's efforts demonstrates their willingness to provide support over a long period of time, carving out a pathway from the camp to university and a plan over the course of several years.

HEIs should also be aware of the gender disparity in higher education access. According to Lorna Solis, the founder of a non-profit organization called Blue Rose Compass, "*For every ten boys, we are able to get one girl [access] and although there are countless programs for girls in primary and secondary schools, the dropout rate by the time they arrive to secondary is more than 60%.*" She urges HEIs to partner with organizations that focus on women's access to higher education, like Blue Rose Compass and Jusoor's 100 Syrian Women, 10,000 Syrian Lives initiative.

Starting small and forming local partnerships is also an effective mode of action. As highlighted in a number of the stories above, students tend to rely heavily on their own personal networks to help them navigate the higher education system. However,

prospective international students or those with immigrant background do not always have these connections. HEIs are recommended to collaborate with local organizations and regional networks, many of which not only actively assist refugees, spearhead integration efforts, and advocate for immigrant rights, but are led by refugees themselves. The aforementioned BSRA and Spark 15 are excellent examples of mentorship and gateway programs that assists local refugees apply to school. This is a model of success for partnerships between local actors and universities support for refugee populations. Partnering with local branches of resettlement and immigrant rights organizations, such as the International Rescue Committee, is also recommended to address the needs of incoming vulnerable students and find areas for joint collaboration.

Finally, there is a great need to work with policymakers to raise awareness of immigration-related challenges and to address these issues, including work authorization and travel. For example, in cases where university-admitted international students could not secure their visas abroad, university representatives coordinated with their Senator offices to garner support for student immigration cases. University representatives also coordinated with one student (who requested to remain anonymous) to provide consultation for the successful lawsuit against the first iteration of the travel ban. The success of these examples affirms that there is room for long term, sustainable change at the local, institutional, and policy levels, especially when university administrators engage strategically with

students from refugee backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See also the joint work between the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration and RU DREAMers.



# 04



## Institutional Perspectives

Christopher Adams  
Jeannie Bell  
Staci Bernhard

Stacey Gustavson  
Dr. Bren Tooley



# Perspective III:

## Institutions

Equitable access to post-secondary education for vulnerable and displaced students is a matter of moral and social duty. However, ensuring this access leaves higher education institutions faced with questions of how to assist and support these students. Ensuring that these students have a home on our campuses increases global learning experiences for all of our students enriches the campus community and has a meaningful impact on the lives of this student population. However, it also implies potential challenges and barriers for both the applicant and the institution.

Most institutions require evidence of an academic record such as transcripts, test scores, and other types of credentialing used for admission. Unfortunately, many displaced students are forced from their home countries unexpectedly, leaving them with limited or incomplete documentation. In other instances, students fear seeking documentation from the home country, or documentation is unavailable due to school closures or destruction as a result of political, military and economic instability. Institutions have various practices on how to handle such situations.

In this section, we will look at what the institution needs to consider when admitting and supporting displaced students, and consider some exceptional case studies from institutions that have worked with these students over time.

### Things to Consider When Admitting and Supporting Displaced Students

Institutions of higher education have standards we must maintain in order to meet federal and state regulations, accreditation standards, and institutional policy. Keeping these in mind, working with displaced students brings about many challenges and concerns, both from the applicant side and the institutional side.

Applicant challenges and concerns start at the point of completing the application. Many have limited documentation, or possibly no documentation, of their previous academic record. School closures or destruction may impact this, and displaced students may have had to leave important documentation behind. For applicants that have left their home country or country of study, there may be fear of persecution for seeking documentation -- for themselves or their families still in the country. Displaced applicants also experience financial issues -- not just for tuition coverage, but support for room and board, cost of living, etc. The admissions process itself in the U.S. context can be confusingly complicated and opaque.

As institutions, first and foremost, we face the issue of how to determine the admissibility for these applicants based on limited documentation. If the institution is able to extend an offer of admission, we are then faced with determining level equivalency for applicants entering with incomplete degree records. There is also the task of finding funding to support these students in a world of limited funding.



Jusoor School, Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon  
Copyright: U. C. Davis

It is imperative that when working with this population, institutions take on the responsibility of understanding the issues that these students face and how this will impact the decision to persist within the institution. Some suggestions for working with this population include:

- Determine what policies the institution has in place for domestic students and see how this can be expanded for displaced students. For example, accepting unofficial documentation for preliminary evaluation.
- Establish a core committee for collecting information, with one or more persons who can serve as primary point of contact for these applicants, and can provide individualized assistance to make the process smoother.
- Ask questions and be prepared to dig deep; it may take additional time to build rapport before the applicant is comfortable sharing a full picture.
- Piece together the educational history based on any documentation you have. Make sure that the information fits the narrative. Use all of the resources available.
- Determine validity, work with the applicant on creating a paper trail recording efforts to obtain documentation.
- Create resources on campus and use outside resources for further assistance. Connect the applicants and students to these resources. When possible, provide aid packages.

### Institutional Perspectives

#### Community Colleges

As institutions that respond to the needs of the local community, community colleges play a critical role in serving displaced student populations. Most of these students have overcome great odds to reach their new community only to find a variety of challenges in pursuing higher education, such as insufficient documentation, financial concerns, and lack of support systems, mental health and trauma issues, as well as culture shock. In addition, many newly arrived refugee and asylee students need to learn English, find employment and care for their families all at the same time. In addressing the particular needs of this student population, community colleges rely on their open access mission to provide flexibility while offering quality education at an affordable cost.

#### *Institutional Case*

Making college accessible and inclusive of diverse student populations is at the heart of one very-large community college located in the Mid-Atlantic region. Serving more than 50,000 students that represent 165 countries, this college has responded to the large foreign-born population in its community with numerous strategies. Academic support, cultural competency, workforce training, language skills, financial assistance and wellness are among the educational needs relevant to displaced students.

Jusoor School, Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon  
Copyright: U. C. Davis



Recognizing the need for English language mastery and acculturation, the institution collaborated with local resettlement and state agencies to offer a refugee training program. This program provides free English, acculturation and workforce preparation courses to qualifying refugee and asylee students. Furthermore, the college offers additional free programming for county residents in need of adult basic skills, ESOL and career programs. These courses assist students with basic academic skills and GED test preparation; English language development; computer literacy; and U.S. citizenship in order to access college and entry-level employment.

In response to the financial burden facing so many of their students, the institution has developed numerous programs and partnerships to complement its relatively low tuition rates. Free shuttles run between campuses to help mitigate the cost of commuting and an increasing number of courses are offered with zero textbook costs. Most recently, a program was created to assist with health and wellness issues that impact academic success such as hunger, homelessness, stress management, and abuse, to name a few. A deep commitment

to addressing increasing food insecurity within the community led to the creation of a monthly mobile food market, which supplements campus food pantries and provides free food for students and community members. For students who do not have computers, computer labs are available as well as a loaner laptop program.

Confusion about where to go and how to navigate the institution led to the creation of campus Welcome Centers. These students are guided with in-depth, one-on-one assistance in multiple languages. For students new to the country, staff explain the U.S. higher education system, types of degrees, differences between credit and noncredit courses, and how to navigate processes such as admissions, financial aid and transfer. Furthermore, students are directed to a multitude of resources such as peer-to-peer and student success programs, mental health and wellness resources, and English language programs. In an effort to ensure staff are culturally responsive, ongoing trainings are provided to increase cross-cultural understanding and awareness of the specific needs related to vulnerable student populations.

In an effort to facilitate successful transitions between the local community, college

and workforce, the institution has developed both internal and external collaborations. Community engagement centers are located in several neighborhoods to connect with individuals that may not have realized college was even an opportunity for them. Increasingly, the college is providing resources in the county's top spoken languages and partnerships with county K-12 schools and local four-year institutions have developed a strong pathway for all students to meet their post-secondary education goals.

#### Four-Year Private Liberal Arts College

Small, private liberal arts colleges have the advantage of relatively little administrative encumbrance on the implementation of initiatives that have gained college-wide support. While they may appear to be expensive at first glance, they are often able to structure one or more full-tuition scholarships for displaced students and students from conflict zones and to engage in personalized outreach and counseling throughout the application process. They can provide exceptionally individualized welcome, with outstanding academic and other support structures, to the students they bring to their

campuses. For example, one small, residential, highly selective liberal arts college in the Midwest works closely with their international student population to provide individual support, before and after the moment of admission. Each applicant is treated individually, and counseling is provided throughout the entire admission process. To begin the review process, the institution accepts copies of academic records, with original or official documentation (or evidence of equivalent academic preparation) required upon matriculation. In this particular institution, the counselors have found that it is almost always possible to obtain the necessary documents, with enough research and investigation, working collaboratively with the student applicant.

Because each case is assessed individually, the institution will also work with the applicant to ensure that financial documentation is clear, verifiable, and acceptable. Due to the private nature of the institution, significant financial tuition assistance is available for academically strong candidates, and the college works with the student to find ways to mitigate costs for housing and meals.

In addition to traditional admission, the institution provides a summer language

and academic-success bridge program specifically for admitted international students. This summer bridge program prepares students for university readiness, improving their language skills, and integrates them into the campus community in a more in-depth way. Thanks to sourced funding, this program is free to financially-needy international students.

#### Four-Year Public Research Institutions

Several four-year institutions have taken on the responsibility of providing access to displaced and vulnerable students. These institutions are traditionally more selective and have to adhere to the accrediting standards in their region, thus limiting the processes for admissibility. Unlike community colleges, the open access model is not necessarily at the forefront of their mandate. Here we will address how several institutions have supported access to displaced and vulnerable students.

#### *Institutional Case 1 - Southeast*

As an institution serving over 55,000 students, with a primarily Hispanic population, this institution has worked with displaced students from countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, and the Caribbean during times of turmoil. As an institution that is focused on the needs of their community,

the need for admission exceptions came from a growing number of applicants from these regions. The institution assesses global situations as they arise and take appropriate action internally, finding solutions that will not violate any regulatory policies.

This institution tries to work with all applicants, based on whatever documentation is available, and will assess each file on a case-by-case basis with the understanding that no two situations are exactly alike. Policies tend to be unwritten and handled more on a situational basis. The admission evaluation team will work closely with the applicants to ensure that all tools are used appropriately for obtaining credentials. Documentation is reviewed and researched as it becomes available. Recruitment and admissions staff build rapport with the applicant to dig deeper into any one-off situations where more information is needed.

On campus resources available to all students include a food pantry, counseling services, health services, and a dedicated international student services office. These resources are outlined at mandatory orientations and encouraged throughout the academic career via digital communications. Students are encouraged to get involved and participate in on-campus organizations. Clubs and

organizations are available for all cultural and religious activities.

The institution actively seeks outside funding from private donors to provide funding to displaced or vulnerable students in various situations.

#### *Institutional Case II - Midwest*

As a well-established institution serving more than 35,000 students, there is a history of working with displaced and vulnerable populations. While these cases are few, the institution does take a case-by-case, labor intensive approach to evaluating these files. Originally, a small team within the admissions office was established to review these cases as they arose, and no formal policies were needed as they were one-off situations.

As the staff grew and office space expanded into separate buildings, it became apparent that a formal policy needed to be created to facilitate better communication and customer service. Upon seeing the need for a more formalized structure, a policy was drafted creating a centralized process. This has allowed the institution to be consistent in its approach, efficient in processing, and ultimately, much more helpful to the student applicants in these situations. While the details of each individual's case is

always unique, the process itself remains the same. Having the policy in place lends status to the applicant's situation and has become another accepted way to process such applications, rather than be considered an exception.

Regarding documentation, the final decision of what constitutes official and complete academic documents resides within the admissions office. Built in to the policy is coordination and consultation with the various stakeholders, such as the applicant, the department, academic advisors, etc. It also includes reaching out to other credential evaluation professionals and admissions officers, or third-party credential evaluation organizations. Since each situation is different, the policy allows for flexibility in how best to gather pertinent information on the student's missing credentials, including the final determination of admissibility.

The policy affords the opportunity to communicate directly with the applicant to determine the specific circumstances and what documentation is need for their particular entry level, as different levels of education require different credentials for admission. The institution works with the applicant to determine what documents

can be supplied, even if partial. The applicant is encouraged to request or retrieve document verification in any form possible, and provide as much information about the educational background as they can. An option to create a self-created transcript is provided with specific guidelines. The applicant is also offered alternative routes to completion such as GED, CLEP, etc. when appropriate. Staff verify as best as possible that the circumstances indicated by the applicant exist, and determine what alternative verification methods can be used for documentation; keeping track of all sources used. A report of the decision on the applicant's documents is kept as part of their academic record, including all pertinent documentation used for the decision.

#### *Institutional Case III - Midwest*

Due to increasing numbers of displaced persons around the world and the possibility of the U.S. accepting more of this population, the institution wanted to establish a policy in reviewing applications of students who may not be able to provide documentation per regular standards. Serving 45,000 students, this institution is faced with a growing number of these applicants.

Since this population arrives

in unique circumstances, the institution wanted unique standards which would both allow them to admit displaced persons into the university as well as maintain the integrity of standards/treating them as equitably as possible to other applicants. Through exceptions to standards based on an individual's situation, the institution has admitted students from this population in the past. Recently, the desire to establish policy encouraged the institution to collect previous precedents and formalize those in practice. This allows for each individual's application to be reviewed in the same way as others. The policy was formed based on both previous practice and contemporary best practice as established by peer institutions and colleagues in the field. Overall, the same processes used with a traditional applicant are used for this population, but are tailored to the individual in cases of displaced or vulnerable situations.

The established practice for these applicants has the applicant entering the workflow as a general applicant. A question built into the application will auto-sort most applicant situations and forward them to the correct office for processing. Some practices are front-loaded toward the beginning of the process

to further sort those that don't initially self-disclose. Offices on campus are compartmentalized to protect the applicants with information provided on a need to know basis.

If an applicant is unable to submit documentation, they will self-disclose when notified for additional materials to complete their application. Since they are unable to complete their application until they provide these materials, the students will be brought to the attention of the relevant staff/office. Director-level staff will handle cases individually once they are identified. The applicant will then be asked to complete multiple interviews with staff to verify the validity of their particular case. With this information, university staff will then connect with external entities to validate the applicant's educational background; e.g. if a university is closed/destroyed they will attempt to contact that university/peer institutions/EducationUSA or other in-country contacts.

The applicant will be admitted once all requirements are fulfilled to a satisfactory degree. Transfer credit/placement questions will be answered jointly between the relevant admissions office and relevant academic department.

Displaced and vulnerable students have access to

additional resources through the international services office during their program of study.

#### **Case Studies**

##### Lost Boys & Girls of the Sudan

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, one institution saw a large number of applicants seeking bachelor's degrees from this region, coming mainly from Kenyan refugee camps. There were many advocates in the community and on campus, and strong support from the Director of Admissions. A policy was implemented to require a combination of academic records. Many had taken the GED and passed with high marks. The institution attempted to retrieve and reconstruct O-Level and A-Level exam histories. Admissions provided a flexible approach and counselors followed up on their progress after admission.

##### Syria

One institution had a Syrian refugee seeking admission to a doctoral level program. The applicant only had a letter from former faculty members at the school in Syria, and department support, including funding. The institution used the internet to research the university attended and verified it had closed due to the conflict, as the student reported. The

applicant's information in the letter provided by the faculty was checked against that of the Syrian higher education system and verified for accuracy. Documentation was kept on file regarding the exception, including all email threads, for reference.

Another institution enrolled a proportionally large cohort of undergraduate Syrian students, many of whom were exceptionally academically capable. Documentation of secondary education was not difficult to obtain; most of the students were able to partially fund their educations, with institutional financial assistance. While college-level English vocabularies were not always in place upon matriculation, students quickly developed the necessary level of proficiency (or better) for success in their studies.

#### Myanmar

One university also saw deep differences in perspectives were seen between Chin students whose families came from Myanmar, a historically Christian ethnic group in western Myanmar, many of whom have been resettled in the United States as refugees, and international students from Myanmar, most of whom were Buddhist.

#### Cuba

During the early 2000s when it was difficult to obtain documentation from Cuba, the admission office at one university established policies on how to work with unofficial documentation -- applicants would need to submit copies of the original document to the admission office, and provide the document to a NACES Member evaluation service to obtain a full credential evaluation. If the evaluation agency determined that the credential used for evaluation was authentic, a waiver of official documentation could be issued as an exception. The admission office provided resources for how to request documentation when this was more difficult.

#### Venezuela

One university established a policy that would allow applicants from Venezuela to apply with unofficial documentation -- applicants would need to submit copies of the original document to the admission office, and provide the document to a NACES Member evaluation service to obtain a full credential evaluation. If the evaluation agency determined that the credential used for evaluation was authentic, a waiver of official documentation could be issued

as an exception. The university will work with the applicant to contact the institution and provide resources for submitting documentation electronically, via courier, or postal mail. For closed institutions, the university works directly with EducationUSA and other services to establish a correct educational history.

#### Puerto Rico Hurricane Impact

After the 2017 hurricane season, one university community expressed concerns for their counterparts in the Caribbean that were directly impacted by the storms. As the university saw a growing need to assist the community that was impacted in this region, primarily in Puerto Rico, an initiative was created to provide paths to admission for students that were enrolled in any degree-seeking program in Puerto Rico. Prospective students from Puerto Rico could provide proof of enrollment in an institution that was impacted by the storms and qualify for entry into this institution. Mini terms were created to ensure that the students from this region would be able to continue with their studies as non-degree seeking students. A tuition waiver granting in-state tuition to these students was applied, and funding was secured to assist with fee payment. Housing options were secured for all students that required housing.

The majority of the students that enrolled as non-degree seeking students, chose to apply for admission into the university upon being able to obtain full academic records from their home institution. Additional support was provided to currently enrolled students that were from Puerto Rico, including tuition waivers for in-state fees, additional scholarship options, food pantry assistance, and counseling support.

#### **Institutional Recommendations to Support Access**

Across the board, institutions seem to have some overarching themes in supporting access for displaced and vulnerable populations. These include:

- Assessing each file on a case-by-case basis
- Ensuring that policy -- written or unwritten -- does not violate any regulations and is best for the institution as a whole
- Creating resources where those may not previously exist

Taking all of this into account, as an institution we become the advocates for these students. It is crucial that we train our staff to ensure that staff are ready to accommodate these students and welcome them to our campuses. Staff need to understand that students from conflict zones may not have the same perspectives

and may be on opposite sides of the conflict.

Provide English and cultural integration classes or activities. Encourage students to get involved and practice their language skills.

Prepare information and directives to on campus services and encourage students to take advantage of all the institution has to offer. Don't assume that the student knows everything that is available to them. Encourage the use of counseling services, food bank services, and legal services on campus when available. Know the community resources in your area and be prepared to provide connections to these resources as well.

Seek outside funding opportunities and work with the students to the best of your ability. Encourage students to apply for aid when available.

05



# Admissions Policies for Displaced/Vulnerable Students

## A Practical Guide for Credential Assessment

Julia Funaki

Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert

Denise Jiljoins

Zachary Holochwost

Bryce Loo

Inside the Jusoor School, Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon. The Backpack Team trained Backpack Guides and enrolled Backpackers in the field.

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# Admissions Policies for Displaced/Vulnerable Students

## A Practical Guide for Credential Assessment

Many displaced and vulnerable students coming to the United States will have completed university-level degrees or at least some coursework. Yet many of these students are unable to access complete official or verifiable documentation of their academic achievements, though they may have partial or unofficial documentation with them. This may be due to the inability of home country institutions to send or verify documents. It may also be due to the students' inability to take much with them when they flee home suddenly. This lack of access to official, verifiable documentation often results in many students unable to prove their past academic work, and they may need to start all over. This is a highly disheartening prospect to well-educated displaced students who face years and thousands of dollars having to essentially re-do their education.

Institutions can help these students get back on track towards finishing their education at any level. Organizations and institutions in Europe, North America, and elsewhere have developed best practices, successfully implemented, to determine the academic background of displaced students in this situation. Below, we summarize these practices into steps your organization can take, which rely on reviewing available documentation of various kinds, applicant and witness accounts, and assessment of skills and competencies. These practices can help institutions at least partially recognize the backgrounds of many displaced student applicants.

We encourage institutions to *proactively* begin discussions of policy and procedures to help these students whenever they show up on your doorstep. In other words, ask: "how can we as an institution help?"

# Formulating Institutional Policy and Procedures

When developing policy and procedures for working with displaced students with non-verifiable or incomplete academic documentation, here are some key questions to ask:

- Who needs to be involved in discussions about assessing existing policies or changing policies and procedures?
- Whose approval do you need? Who else needs to be "on board" with these changes, both above and below you? How can you create buy-in from these individuals?
- Who would be eligible for this type of procedure? How would you determine eligibility? See suggestions in Step 1 below.
- Who will be responsible for making decisions regarding exceptions to the normal procedures?
- What are some potential risks to your office and to your institution? How can you mitigate those risks?
- What are some potential benefits of having set policies and procedures for this group?
- Who would be the point person or office for connecting individuals to appropriate resources, assessment, and support?
- Where would the most appropriate place be to situate this person on your campus?
- If you regularly work with credential evaluation services:
- Which of these services provide assistance in working with non-verifiable credentials?
- How can you work together to address the challenges?



# Tools for working with non-verifiable or incomplete documentation

The steps outlined below provide institutions with some tools for working with non-verifiable or incomplete documentation:

- Step 1: Identify Need and Determine Eligibility
- Step 2: Reconstruct the Applicant's Academic Background
- Step 3: Utilize Various Types of Standard and Supporting or Collaborating Documents
- Step 4: Utilize Resources and Expertise
- Step 5: Assess Learning
- Step 6: Conduct the Final Analysis and Reach a Decision

## Tools for working with non-verifiable or incomplete documentation

### ■ Step 1: Identify Need and Determine Eligibility



For most institutions, the first step is to consider the situation of the applicant, once it becomes clear that this individual is a refugee, asylum-seeker, or other displaced individual. The key question is: Under what circumstances do they need 'special consideration' if they are unable to meet your regular documentation requirements? A screening process with criteria that are as transparent as possible, at least internally, is required, but how does the individual access such consideration if it is not widely advertised? While determining eligibility is fundamental to our work, let's start this journey looking through the eyes of the potential applicant.

Keep in mind that for many vulnerable and displaced persons this may be one of the final steps in a very long and harrowing journey where they have met with much hardship and rejection. They may have already experienced frustration in understanding 'the system' and who can help them. Remember, you will be asking them to share their story and documentation with you without making any promises. You must earn their trust and confidence, beginning with how accessible and welcoming your institution is.

Do an audit. Put yourself in the student's shoes. Is it easy for a potential refugee student to find the right assistance on your campus, or are they likely to be given a run around? What door do they usually knock on? What kind of welcome do they receive? A large community college in the

mid-atlantic region has a dedicated welcome center for refugees that can answer questions and refer appropriately; at the very least there should be a designated (and gentle and compassionate) contact person trained to engage with this population that anyone can refer to. Institutions that have training, clear policies and procedures for getting displaced and vulnerable individuals to the right office or contact person no matter what 'door' they knock on (a 'no wrong door' policy) will go a long way to providing access and minimizing unnecessary distress.

**Determine eligibility.** Once the individual lands in front of an admissions officer, here are some tips for determining eligibility for an exception to usual policy or for an alternative procedure:

- Explain the potential outcomes of an alternative procedure relative to the usual process. In the majority of cases, going through the regular process of having full, official or verifiable credentials evaluated will produce better outcomes for the individual student. At that point, students who are able to access full, official documentation will likely do so.
- Ask the applicant to explain their circumstances, whether through an application, written statement, interview, or informal conversation. Why are they not able to obtain official documents? If you want something with more legal weight, ask for a written statement that is notarized.
- As much as needed and is possible, corroborate the applicant's statements about the situation from which they came. This can be done through a variety of means, such as using news sources, Google searches, contacts at EducationUSA regional offices, and more. For example, if the applicant says that she cannot contact her Syrian institution because it was bombed and has closed, news about this can often be found

through a Google search.

There are a variety of reasons why an individual may not be able to access official or verifiable documentation. These reasons can come from either or both the institutional side and the individual side. In the wake of significant conflict, political issues, or disasters, institutions may:

- Not be functioning partly or temporarily, or may be closed entirely.
- Have physically relocated.
- Have lost records or other infrastructure crucial in issuing credentials.
- Not be capable of sending or verifying credentials due to lack of financial, human, or other resources.
- Refuse to issue documents for an applicant for a variety of reasons, including political reasons.
- Only issue documents to an applicant in person as a matter of standard practice. This is not possible for refugees and asylum-seekers who have fled the country.

Individual applicants, in some cases, may have good reasons for not requesting their credentials from institutions or ministries of education (which can be agents of the local government) for fear of retribution to themselves or their loved ones who are still in the country. Many young Syrian men, for example, have fled that country to avoid mandatory military service to the Assad regime (see Gopalakrishnan, 2017). By requesting documents be delivered to an institution abroad, these young men will expose that they fled the country and thus avoided their military service, putting family and friends on the ground still in Syria potentially in jeopardy.

# Building in a flexible framework

## The Scenario

Several years after the small, residential liberal arts college began welcoming Syrian students through a connection with the IIE consortium addressing the crisis in higher education in Syria, a student resident in Syria applied for admission with very little high school schooling or documentation. This was in part because the secondary institution he had briefly attended (literature and Arabic society track) had closed because of the conflict, and in part because there was no documentation to be had, at all, about the last few years of what would have been his high school experience. His family had sent him away from Syria to live with relatives in an adjacent country for what would have been these last years of high school. He had managed to receive private tutoring in preparation for his Syrian baccalaureate examinations (the upper secondary examinations), which he returned to Damascus to take, and he did have the official examination results. His scores were mixed. He did not have letters of recommendation from high school teachers or counselors, of course, nor complete high school transcripts. We were never able to verify the documentation he provided by direct contact with the high school he briefly attended.

## The Flexibility

However, while in the neighboring country, he had completed an internship with a visiting U.S. academic at the U.S. embassy, and had received her positive endorsement. We had her contact information and were able to reach her directly. She testified to the student's English language ability and general preparedness for college-level study. We decided to review this student as nearly as we could as if he were a home-schooled student: considering his essay, what information we did have about his schooling and exam results, and the supplementary letter of recommendation, and assessing his abilities and interests through emails and messaging (including Facebook shared information). We decided to admit him with scholarship, and placed him into carefully selected first-semester classes with results from diagnostic placement tests administered after he arrived (as we place all international students).

## The Outcome

As it turns out, he was a gifted, earnest, hardworking and very successful student. He has now graduated and has returned to his family in Syria, where he is pursuing graduate study in international relations.

Jarahiyya Refugee Camp, Central Biqa' Valley, Lebanon  
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## Step 2: Reconstruct the Applicant's Academic Background



The first step in evaluating an individual's academic credentials begins with reviewing their complete educational background. It is important to fully understand an individual's educational history so as to consider the full picture of the individual. Knowing which academic credentials were pursued, whether completed or not, can help determine the route an individual took in furthering their education and what they had access to, whether it was further secondary education, access to vocational education, or admission into tertiary education. Admissions offices can gather such information in a variety of ways, including a formal application specifically for this process, a written statement, or an interview.

If information is missing in the educational history of the individual, it can be difficult to evaluate certain credentials. Missing background information also has the potential for raising concerns about the documents that were submitted if an individual is unwilling or unable to produce a complete educational history of the programs they attended and completed. Therefore, having information on the complete educational history of an individual can be crucial in evaluating one's academic credentials.

Likewise, supplemental documentation can paint a broader picture of the individual and what programs they attended in order to pursue further education or employment. The more information one can gather on the background of an individual, the more accurate the credential evaluation will be in supporting the student or employee.

### • Complete educational history:

- List of all schools attended beginning with elementary, name of schools, location, dates of attendance, titles of any diploma/certificate/degree earned
- Clarification of gaps in education, missing documents, and related circumstances

### • Supplemental documentation:

- Information on applicant's professional background, work experience (where, with who, doing what)
- List of any documents supporting work experience, commendations, awards, employment qualifications, recommendation letters, financial records related to employment, etc.
- Verification letters or affidavit from institutions



[www.aacrao.org/PledgeforEducation](http://www.aacrao.org/PledgeforEducation)  
Take the pledge to support displaced and vulnerable students.

### Step 3: Utilize Various Types of Standard and Supporting or Collaborating Documents



Typically, an individual with studies completed at an institution of higher education outside the United States who is seeking admission to a U.S. college/university is required to provide official academic transcripts and proof of any certificate/diploma or degree issued by the source institution. These documents are verifiable with the source institution. However, this procedural policy may not be applicable to individuals whose education may have been interrupted by natural disaster, conflict, or other crisis.

Recognition of international qualifications of displaced/vulnerable persons with insufficient documentation is an important component of the daily

activities of admission officers at U.S. institutions of higher education. A procedure must be in place for those individuals with studies at non-U.S. institutions of higher education who cannot receive general recognition of their studies due to missing, insufficient or unverifiable documents. In the event complete academic transcripts, degree/certificate/diploma are not available, or only partially available, the following additional documents may be requested as proof of attendance and/ registration at the institution(s) where studies were completed:

- Student ID Cards
- Proof of Tuition Payments
- Letters of Reference from Teachers
- Letters of Reference from Employers
- Proof of having participated in state exams
- Proof of licenses/permits to practice profession
- Membership cards to student clubs/groups on campus
- Membership cards for professional associations

- News clipping of articles about applicant either in campus or local paper (highlighting achievement/award, etc.)
- Artistic Works & Accomplishments Relevant to studies (e.g. photographs, art work, speeches, designs, publications)
- Audiovisual Presentations Relevant to the Work Experience (e.g. audiotapes, slides, videotapes, etc.)
- Syllabi
- Sworn statements/Affidavits (legally binding) by 3rd parties attesting to the validity of the information
- Witness statements/ testimonials

## Corroborating Information and Documentation

### The Scenario

An Iranian student contacted this large public university after they were forced to flee their home country due to fear of persecution. Before submitting their application, they wanted to make sure they would be considered for admission since they were unable to secure complete academic documentation before fleeing. Representatives from the university encouraged them to apply, noting that the admissions office would consider their unique situation and work with them on meeting the published requirements. The student was able to submit photocopies of the original Persian academic records along with original translations from the Iranian Ministry of Justice.

### The Flexibility

Working with a local translation company, the university admissions office was able to corroborate the information shared in the translations with that shown in the photocopies of the original documents. They were also able to utilize their internal database of official records from other students who attended the same university in past years. By comparing the format, signatures, and other security markings among these records, they approved the accuracy of the photocopies and admitted the student off the records provided.

### The Outcome

The student is performing exceptionally well in their program related to language and regional studies of Iran and has consistently received top marks throughout their time at this institution.



#### Step 4: Utilize Resources and Expertise



The key question in this step is: Based on the documents gathered, how do we assess the individual's acquired learning? The training, expertise, and resources available to those who evaluate academic credentials is central to providing high quality, accurate, and consistent evaluations for individuals. Staff must have proper training in credential evaluation policies, both organization-wide and country-specific. Learning a variety of educational systems, various languages, and the differing formats of country and institutional documents is essential.

If possible, securely archiving all international credentials that are received should be maintained. Access to an archive of academic documents can provide insight on document formats, matching signatures, and other security features that can help determine the authenticity of documents. Additionally, archiving documents can maintain accuracy and consistency in determining grading scale and credit conversions.

Numerous external resources are available for credential evaluators to develop their professional skills as well as providing support for credential evaluations if internal resources are insufficient. Publications and online resources exist to contribute to the

global community of credential evaluators. Webinars and onsite training, conferences, and presentations are available to those needing the resources to better equip staff in providing accurate credential evaluations. Furthermore, message boards and other global networks provide platforms for collaboration and support among professionals in the field.

Here is a checklist for institutions to follow in ensuring appropriate expertise and available resources:

- Ensure availability of in-house expertise
- Staff training
- Proven experience and knowledge of global education systems and current events/politics
- Fluency in language relevant to the applicant's background
- Familiarity with document forensics
- Have access to previously evaluated academic credentials
- Document archives (physical and/or digital)
- Access to previous evaluations for consistency in equivalencies as well as grading scales and credit conversions
- Resources beyond academic credentials
- Published resources, internal library
- External resources (see Resources):
- News publications and research institutes, including (but not limited to):
- The PIE News
- University World News
- Al-Fanar Media
- Migration Policy Institute (MPI)

## Resources, Expertise and Alternative Routes to Admission

### The Scenario

In the mid 2010's, a student from Syria applied to a doctoral program at a large public university. A department staff member of that university contacted Admissions to indicate that several faculty in the department wished to admit this student, and the department would provide funding. The student had a valid TOEFL score that met university requirements. One of the recommendation letters was from a US faculty member at another US university, who had known and worked with this student in Syria for many years. At issue was that the student would be unable to submit any type of standard academic documents. He had only an English translation of a certificate of graduation from the Syrian university. Residing in another European country at the time of application, the student would literally be risking his life if he tried to return to Syria to get his documents. There was no one in country to do this on his behalf. Even if he could return, higher education institutions in Syria were facing a crisis with the Syrian civil war, and his university was in one of the most dangerous areas.

### The Flexibility

The Office of Admissions was willing to consider this request. Admissions staff worked on various methods for confirming the information provided by the student, checking the web for location and status of his university, checking with the Admissions Director to see if such an admit was possible, checking additional print and web resources for university recognition and marks/grade conversion (the certificate of graduation mentioned a final percentage grade for the program completion). This willingness to consider alternative routes toward fulfilling application requirements, and due diligence in pursuing substantiation of the student's explanation, resulted in the student being admitted. All supporting information was saved to the student's record.

### Step 5: Assess Learning



Insofar as a credential reflects mastery of a body of knowledge or competency, assessing acquired learning is a way of corroborating documentary evidence. Institutions have various ways of assessing formal and non-formal learning that can be applied to this situation. These strategies may be employed at the time of admission to corroborate an applicant's claims and address inconsistencies in documentation. Subject matter expertise at the departmental level can be deployed not only to support the admission decision, but also to inform decisions regarding placement, advanced standing, transfer credit, or meeting course prerequisites. In these ways, the applicant is given a chance to demonstrate the credibility of their claims where documentary evidence may be unverified, partial, or inconclusive.

Once the documentary evidence has been thoroughly examined, institutions can employ one or several of various techniques to assess knowledge or competency in a subject matter:

- **Examinations:** These can include large-scale exams such as the SAT or GRE, or individual course challenge exams. However,

foreign-trained individuals are often unfamiliar with standardized testing, and this may bias results. For sequential subjects, such as mathematics, it is possible to backfill coursework based on successful passage of some exams, or to use them to waive course prerequisites or award advanced standing.

- **Assessment or audit of skills:** This allows applicants to demonstrate skills through scenarios or simulation activities. For example, students in healthcare fields can demonstrate important healthcare-related skills that would indicate training in that particular specialty.
- **Interviews:** Applicants can be interviewed by professors, subject matter experts, and/or a country specialist to corroborate acquisition of content/knowledge. Norway's primary agency for the evaluation of international qualifications, NOKUT, piloted this method for refugees coming to Norway, known as UVD (NOKUT, 2019). This method is now a standardized part of the process for the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), in which authorities examine non-official or incomplete documentation and interview the applicant in order to facilitate recognition of their qualifications (Council of Europe, 2019).
- **Completion of a special project or paper:** A professor can assign a topic, have regular or occasional check-in meetings with the applicant, and then evaluate the assignment.

This allows the applicant to demonstrate both knowledge and abilities in the subject matter.

- **Portfolio or sample work:** The applicant can submit sample of previous work or a portfolio of academic achievement, particularly a thesis or published work for higher-level students, for examination. Additionally, there can be a peer review of any research findings.
- **Utilize Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) tools and processes,** where applicable: PLA is a process by which applicants can gain academic credit for out-of-classroom activities, such as work, volunteering, or hobbies, past or present. Several organizations, such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) can advise more on how this process works.

### Step 6: Conduct the Final Analysis and Reach a Decision



The final step is to conduct a final analysis – examining all documentary evidence along with any assessment of competencies – and issue a decision. Whenever possible, institutions should provide full recognition of applicants' academic qualifications, which helps applicants to avoid starting over completely. This would allow students to access higher-level degree programs (such as master's degree programs), transfer credit, or advanced standing.

However, this may not always be possible. Institutions likely need to weigh the evidence of the applicant's claimed history against any risk to the institution and the general public. The risks involved will vary by level and subject of study. In most cases, however, risk is likely minimal. When not able to provide full recognition, institutions can provide at least some recognition of claimed background using the methods above.

International best practices have identified three main forms of recognition other than full recognition<sup>2</sup> :

2 Loo, B. (2016). Recognizing Refugee Qualifications: Practical Tips for Credential Assessment. New York: World Education Services (WES). Retrieved from <https://knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-recognizing-refugee-credentials.html>.

- **Conditional recognition:** Recognize the applicant's claimed history and allow entry into the program of application, on the condition that the applicant meet certain requirements in a specified timeframe (e.g., a semester or a year). Example requirements could include maintaining a certain GPA and/or grade levels in each class or receive tutoring.
- **Partial recognition:** Recognize part, rather than all, of a degree program. The applicant would need to complete the remaining courses required toward the degree, including any that are context-specific for that country/region, such as U.S. tax regulations, for a business student.
- **Alternative recognition:** Recognize the applicant for a different qualification than the one claimed.

Again, the key is to find ways to allow displaced students opportunities to move forward with their lives in new countries.

■ Working with a credential evaluation service



Third-party foreign credential evaluation services fill an important position in the admissions process for many universities and colleges in helping to evaluate the credentials of all applicants educated abroad and advise on the comparabilities of their degrees in the U.S. While students on international student visas are the primary individuals needing foreign credential evaluation, any applicant for admission who was educated outside of the United States may apply for an evaluation. This includes many displaced students.

Credential evaluation services can assist institutions dealing with complex or lesser-known credentials, particularly from those countries that don't send large numbers of international students. They typically have dedicated staff with the expertise in systems of education, documentation, and languages of different countries. They

usually have connections with education officials and academic institutions abroad, with whom they can verify information and documents. Additionally, they also have large databases with sample transcripts, degree certificates, syllabi, curricula, and other important educational documents from institutions in most countries.

There are numerous ways in which an institution can work with a credential evaluation service to assist displaced students without official or verifiable documentation. One, of course, is to refer these students to such a service that has systems in place to help such students. Most credential evaluation services also offer resources to evaluators at universities and colleges - free or fee-based - that can include articles, blog posts, webinars, training services, databases of documents, message boards, and direct contact with experts from the organization. Some such resources are listed toward the end of this toolkit. The key is to reach out to organizations with which you work and discuss your options.

If you have never worked with a credential evaluation service and are interested, the best thing to do is consult with one or both of the two main national associations of credential evaluation services:

- National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES), with 19 member organizations (at the time of writing): <http://www.naces.org/members.html>.
- Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE), with 9 member organizations (at the time of writing): <http://aice-eval.org/members/>.

Both organizations help provide quality assurance through codes of ethics for all member organizations, and both are recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of State (n.d.). You may also try reaching out to a trusted colleague at another institution for a recommendation. It is important to research the credential evaluation service you select to ensure they have the expertise you are looking for and that they are an appropriate choice for your institution.

# Additional Thoughts

Documentation, of course, is only one major challenge of displaced students. They typically face many other challenges, which may also overlap with the issue of academic documentation. Some typical challenges include:

- **Status:** Students who are awaiting asylum decisions and undocumented/DACA students face the uncertainty of their legal status within the United States. Others who have come under special statuses, such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS), may face the possibility of having their status revoked.
- **Financing:** Displaced students often come with few or no financial resources to pay for an often expensive U.S. higher education. While resettled refugees are given permanent resident status and can apply for federal and state student aid, students who have applied for and are awaiting asylum generally have no access to such aid.
- **Language proficiency:** Lack of sufficient English proficiency, including in academic English, may preclude many displaced students from attending a university or college. In some cases, students may be proficient but struggle with traditional language assessments, particularly examinations.
- **Understanding of U.S. society and higher education:** Many displaced students have arrived in the U.S. with little or no ability to plan ahead. They may find U.S. higher education and society more broadly difficult to navigate.
- **Cultural adjustment:** Like international students, displaced students must learn to adjust to U.S. culture in order to thrive. They often have to adapt to the U.S. style of teaching and learning. Adjustment is often also wrapped up with language proficiency and the ability to communicate adequately with faculty, staff, and peers. Additionally, many may experience different forms of discrimination, prejudice, and microaggressions on and off campus.
- **Trauma and other psychosocial challenges:** Students who have survived conflict, persecution, or natural disaster may arrive in the U.S. and on campus suffering from various degrees of trauma and other mental health conditions. Further complicating this challenge is that mental health and treatment can be viewed very differently among different cultures.

# 01

## GENERAL RESOURCES

Melanie Gottlieb (AACRAO), Annetta Stroud (AACRAO), Adrienne Fricke (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative) at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy, American University Beirut, Lebanon for the launch of the Article 26 Backpack

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# General Resources

ACEI-Global.Blog:

<https://acei-global.blog/2016/11/05/argav-aceis-5-step-practical-guide-in-helping-refugees-and-displaced-people-without-or-limited-documentation/>

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/30/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>

ACEI® The Welcome Project: <https://www.acei-global.org/the-welcome-project/>

Central Office for Foreign Education at the Kultusministerkonferenz (Germany ENIC-NARIC) (2015). Access and Admission to Institutions of Higher Education for Applicants who are Unable to Provide Evidence of a Higher Education Entrance Qualification Obtained in their Home Country on Account of their Flight.

Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education: <https://www.cccie.org/>

Danish Agency for Higher Education (Danish ENIC-NARIC Centre). Background report on foreign educational qualifications. <https://ufm.dk/en/education/recognition-and-transparency/get-assessment/background-report>

ECE® Aid: <https://www.ece.org/ECE/ECE-Aid>

ECE® Connection: <https://theconnection.ece.org/>

ECE® Connection Advantage: <https://theconnection.ece.org/Advantage>

Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE). (2018). Welcoming Immigrants and Refugees: Emerging Trends in U.S. Higher Education - Part I: Challenges.

<https://theconnection.ece.org/NewsItem/1320>

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<https://theconnection.ece.org/NewsItem/1325>

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EAR-HEI Consortium. (2016) Recognition of qualification holders without documentation - European guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers. [https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/6243\\_EAR-HEI-Recognition-of-qualification-holders-without-documentation.pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/6243_EAR-HEI-Recognition-of-qualification-holders-without-documentation.pdf)

EAR Consortium. (2012). European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual, chapter 12. [http://eurorecognition.eu/manual/ICES \(International Credential Evaluation Services\). Report: Seminar on Recognition of Refugee Qualifications. https://www.cicic.ca/docs/en/refugee.en.pdf](http://eurorecognition.eu/manual/ICES_(International_Credential_Evaluation_Services).Report:Seminar_on_Recognition_of_Refugee_Qualifications.https://www.cicic.ca/docs/en/refugee.en.pdf)

Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration: <https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/>

TAICEP (The Association of International Credential Evaluation Professionals). <https://www.taicep.org/taiceporgwp/>

World Education Services (WES) Global Talent Bridge: <https://www.wes.org/partners/global-talent-bridge/>

World Education Services (WES) Global Talent Bridge. *Bridging the Gap for Foreign-Educated Immigrants: A Guide for Community Colleges*. <https://communitycolleges.globaltalentbridge.org/>

World Education Services (WES). (2016). Recognizing Refugee Qualifications: Practical Tips for Credential Assessment. <https://knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-recognizing-refugee-credentials.html>

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## The Academy

Dr. Kyle Farmbry	University Alliance of Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM) / Rutgers University
Jisun Jeong	George Washington University
Jane Roche	University Alliance of Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM) / Rutgers University
Dr. Belma Sadikovic	Minnesota State University Moorhead
Dr. Bernhard Streitwieser	George Washington University
Dr. Keith David Watenpaugh	University of California, Davis

## The Scholar

James R. King	Institute of International Education - Scholar Rescue Fund (SRF)
Dr. Chelsea A. Blackburn Cohen	Scholars at Risk Network (SAR)

## The Student

George Batah	Syrian Youth Empowerment
Demetria Charlifue	U.S. Department of State
Nele Feldmann	Institute of International Education - Platform for Education in Emergencies Response (IIE PEER)
Jane Roche	University Alliance of Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM) / Rutgers University

## The Institution

Christopher Adams	Indiana University Bloomington
Jeannine Bell	University of Colorado Boulder
Staci Bernhard	Florida International University
Stacey Gustavson	Montgomery College
Bren Tooley	Knox College

## The Recommendations

Julia Funaki	American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)
Denise Jillioins	World Education Services (WES)
Bryce Loo	World Education Services (WES)
Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert	Academic Credentials Evaluation Institute, Inc. (ACEI)
Zachary Holochwost	Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE)

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## AACRAO Editors:

Brooke Barnett
Quintina Barnett Gallion
Melanie Gottlieb
Annetta Stroud



American Association of Collegiate Registrars  
and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

1108 16th Street NW Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20036

[www.aacrao.org](http://www.aacrao.org)