

# UNIVERSITY ALLIANCE FOR REFUGEES AND AT-RISK MIGRANTS (UARRM)

## First Convening of the UARRM

February 2, 2018

Paul Robeson Campus Center  
Rutgers University – Newark  
350 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Newark, NJ 07102

### *~SUMMARY REPORT~*

## Background

On February 2, 2018, Rutgers University-Newark hosted a conference on the University Alliance on Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM). Characterized as a “soft launch”, with a more formal one planned for July 2018, the gathering’s objectives were to further develop thinking on the work of the Alliance, following the validation of its 6 areas of work (Action Areas) on November 29, 2017.<sup>1</sup> The conference served to gather information that will serve as the basis for the work program of each Action Area for the period 2018-2019, and to mobilize additional champions for the UARRM’s work.

The crux of the Rutgers Conference was to unpack different considerations/dimensions of each Action Area. For this purpose, working groups on each led by experts in the respective fields, facilitated discussions. Findings were later reported to the conference plenary.

57 people from universities, the United Nations, foundations, think tanks, NGOs, and non-profit organizations participated.

Following the conference, information on each Action Area is to be shared and compiled on a dedicated website.<sup>2</sup> This information will help universities become aware of other actions taken across university campuses in the United States. It may also assist universities to consolidate their activities in this field. It is possible that sharing this information will support universities in identifying, tailoring and replicating existing activities at other universities. Further, this information can be used for global advocacy efforts, enlightening national governments during the negotiations of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees in 2018<sup>3</sup> and related grass-roots efforts within the United States and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Note on Outcomes: Expert Brainstorming Meeting.”

<sup>2</sup> A website similar to the European University Association’s (EUA) “Refugees Welcome Map” was suggested as a framework. See: <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/eua-campaigns/refugees-welcome-map>

<sup>3</sup> The global compact for migration will be the first, internationally agreed-upon UN accord, “...to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner” (<http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>). Given that the US Government, on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, announced its withdrawal from the negotiations of the duty to engage is especially pressing (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/05/u-s-cities-want-to-join-u-n-migration-talks-that-trump-boycotted/>; [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1)).

For coordination purposes, a joint calendar is being developed on benchmarks, related milestones, and events for which the UARRM can support and scale up existing initiatives, influence vested stakeholders, and advocate on behalf of its beneficiaries.

## Highlights by Action Area

### **Action Area #1: Offering More Legal Pathways into the United States**

**Moderator:** Sarah Willcox, Director, Scholar Rescue Fund, Institute of International Education (IIE)

Participants brainstormed on existing alternative and complementary legal pathways that can be used by at-risk migrants and by asylum-seekers for the purposes of studying, training, and teaching in the United States. It was broadly considered that the political climate in the US makes visas for admission increasingly difficult. Creative solutions are to be sought, and many are often under the radar. *The Alliance should work on compiling the programs that provide entry for refugee and at-risk migrants refugees and scholars (e.g., Scholar Rescue Fund), keeping in mind that some programs will not wish to be advertised.*

Further, it was generally agreed that fellowships are the ideal vehicle but that these require a large amount of resources and visa capability. Therefore, the Alliance should work to influence those who have the power to provide these resources. *In this aspect, participants agreed that the Alliance could match universities without visa capability with universities that do, in an effort to facilitate helping to place refugee and at-risk students.*

Participants discussed short-term and long-term pathways for refugee students. Being that organizations like the Scholar Rescue Fund typically provide temporary pathways for threatened scholars in the form of J1 and student visas, participants agreed that we must move toward a more sustainable solution. Participants shared examples from other countries, notably Canada and Germany, which provide promising models for preparing students for industry and/or informing the government of placements available. Participants agreed that private/employment-based visas are excellent alternative, longer-term pathway options. The Academy should therefore partner with the private sector and consider employment-based immigration, company sponsors, and/or develop programs that link enrollment with employment. Not only is this sensible/long-term, but it may have political sway. The need for research on foreign degree holders and their prospects of getting jobs in the US was also noted. *The Alliance can help support partnerships with the private sector, making connections for possible replication of existing partnerships and bringing visibility to these.*

### **Action Area #2: Overcoming Entry Barriers for Higher Education**

**Moderator:** Annetta Stroud, Associate Director for Training and Program Development, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

Participants identified the major barriers to providing higher education to refugee and at-risk migrant populations in the US, including: English language proficiency (ELP), educational documentation, legal status, soft skills (e.g., how to navigate application process and university websites), cultural factors, financial barriers, psycho-social support, interruption of study and/or lack of formal schooling in the home country, standardized test scores, lack of informed educational advisors, ethics of selection (e.g., globalization strategy, some countries preferred over others), and lack of cross-cultural awareness in the US.

These obstacles were discussed in three broad categories: language; documentation and accreditation; and funding. On language, participants provided good examples from universities offering: outreach,

Student/Teacher training, increased writing center resources, gateway/bridge programs to entry for incoming students, and virtual coaching for language skills.

On inadequate or inappropriate documentation for gaining admission, admissions frameworks may lack flexibility for refugee documentation, or admissions staff may lack knowledge/training on refugee situations. At present, some institutions are building more flexible frameworks, increasing training of international admissions officers, and developing alternative measures of assessment for incoming refugee students.

On lack of funding and difficulties navigating a complex funding system: some institutions are working to facilitate the process by matching funding opportunities, partnering with outside organizations (e.g., IIE/ PEER), working with designated officials on campus, waiving application fees or parts of the application process, establishing university programs and campuses abroad to alleviate U.S. financing challenges, and organizing work-study opportunities for refugee students either on or off-campus.

*The Alliance can showcase the work relating to reducing such barriers, and share these with universities and with NGOs that provide support to refugee and migrant associations/communities.*

It is worth noting that these challenges are a two-way street both for higher education establishments and for the applicants. New systems should be put in place, and participants offered some ideas. They discussed the possibility of establishing an alternative transparent assessment system that is not based on a standardized test as a way of facilitating application procedures, thereby reducing the complexity of admission. This would assist both admissions officers and students. Gateway programs were also discussed as an important opportunity to more successfully integrate refugees into the U.S. educational system (e.g., AACRAO). A third idea that was considered worth further exploration is the possibility of establishing learning centers in foreign countries. These might have the advantage of easier access for refugees in light of the shifting U.S. policy environment. *The Alliance can provide a space for exploring new ideas coming from universities on how to tackle these challenges in the future, and relay these recommendations to relevant parties.*

### **Action Area #3: On-Campus Assistance and Empowerment**

**Moderator:** Kelly Agnew-Barajas, Catholic Charities, Director of Refugee Resettlement, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York

Efforts are already underway to support and empower refugees and at-risk migrants within university communities. Service learning programs, for instance, allow student cohorts and interns to gain hands on experience while delivering direct support services to refugees and at-risk migrants in local communities. Two excellent examples include the University of Connecticut and Yale University, both of which operate asylum and human rights clinics. The former's clinic is described as inter-professional and involves students from the health center who do forensic/psychiatric evaluations. Participants also spoke of the need and potential for clinics to perform more groundwork, functioning to have faculty and student interns serve as *pro-bono* counselors in legal settings. For instance, interns and faculty could assist asylum-seeker clients with affidavits or testimonies in court. *The Alliance can bring visibility to such efforts, connect information across regions and states based on existing efforts, and inform universities that are seeking to establish similar legal assistance mechanisms.*

Further, the design of refugee resettlement was discussed. Broadly, the "self-empowerment" welfare model is unrealistic for refugee communities. Participants explored other avenues for community assistance like Westchester County's community co-sponsorship network, which receives intense training prior to a refugee family's arrival. One participant pointed out that the UARRM could serve to support and grow ad hoc resettlement services (e.g., where second and third generation Syrians in Ohio

pay the rent of new arrivals). The group also discussed the importance of supporting and engaging well-established immigrant networks for urgent action more easily and efficiently. *The Alliance can usefully pull from the refugee resettlement expertise, and draw out opportunities for universities' support of local resettlement efforts.* It is therefore crucial to build capacity among university staff and students who may be under-trained in this area.

Participants also discussed the challenges in addressing today's legal environment on refugee policy and immigration, documentation, policy, and data protection. In response, some US Universities have created legal and psychosocial support programs for anyone from a country in crisis. This creates a feeling of inclusion in difficult times. Nevertheless, participants agreed that social isolation experienced by refugee and at-risk migrant students and scholars is overlooked, especially in rural areas. It was considered that guided discussion groups could usefully support, grow, and provide more structure to existing peer support for students (e.g., conversational/language exchange). More and better direct needs assessments should be conducted, with the support of local NGOs. *The Alliance can help bring to light the findings of such assessments, and the possible discrepancies between universities' programming/prioritizing, and the actual needs of refugees/at-migrants are in the community.*

#### **Action Area #4: Advocacy and Coalition-building**

**Moderator:** Julia Roig, President, PartnersGlobal

Advocacy is a learned skill. In this polarized society we must build "collaborative advocacy" skills. Universities should be tapped for their leadership and curriculum for the purpose of passing on these skills to the next generation (e.g., see Rutgers' Conflict Resolution program).

Participants agreed that advocacy efforts should be values-driven, and serve as a channel for sharing nuanced narratives and building dialogue. The objectives of advocacy should be clearly stated and should, in this context, serve to influence public policy. *The Alliance should further refine what its advocacy work can be, in addition to sharing information on existing advocacy undertaken by university communities.*

Universities are connected to networks in local communities/cities, alumni, corporations, civil society, and other universities. Each of these partners is an asset. For instance, it is crucial to advocate for and support student activism and on-campus movements (e.g., see Germany's "Students for Refugee Welcome Program" as a model; No Lost Generation, founded by George Washington University students; Rutgers University's RU Dreamers). Student movements have "the power to pressure the power" within and outside the university, especially if they are supported and given tools to build their capacity.

Participants also discussed the scope of mapping and effective avenues for sharing information (e.g., by tapping university networks like the "Big 10" Academic Alliance). There are challenges in finding larger silos and international leadership "knowledge communities" (e.g., NAFSA). *The Alliance could build and maintain a mechanism to monitor best practices and success stories and use these for advocacy, lobbying, replication, and to use for writing statements, Op-Eds, and for approaching other allies.*

#### **Action Area #5: Research**

**Moderator:** Bernhard Streitwieser, Interim Director, International Education Program, Assistant Professor of International Education, The George Washington University

Participants identified relevant research themes and avenues for collaboration. All agreed that a database of present and past areas of research findings could include: refugees as service providers, refugee wellness post-settlement, challenges in accessing higher education for refugees, comparative policy analysis, refugee entrepreneurship (particularly with regard to female refugees), mapping work,

documentation issues, youth integration, and studies on displaced scholars. While this list of research interests could be expanded upon further, it serves as a concrete starting point. Nevertheless, a number of challenges exist in this field. A major challenge cited was obtaining accurate population data in particular for certain categories of people (e.g. undocumented migrants).

It was further considered how research findings could best inform policy. *The Alliance should establish a database of existing research areas and research requests/questions, and a hub to post reports, research and other relevant information.*

### **Action Area #6: Media and Communications**

**Moderator:** Timothy Raphael, Director, Center for Migration and the Global City, Rutgers-Newark

There are multiple opportunities for higher education institutions to employ media and communications platforms for the benefit of the Alliance's work. Ultimately, media drives much of the conversation. It is therefore necessary to work with communications specialists to build awareness and counter negative narratives. This is particularly true regarding the national discourse around refugees and refugee resettlement. Participants were eager to understand how underlying narratives affect people's understanding and perception of refugee-related issues, and how these narratives contribute to polarization. *The Alliance should work to identify people with media and communications expertise, establish needs and roles of media and communications platforms, and recruit other media companies as allies for its advocacy efforts.*

Participants also discussed the need to investigate how media and communications potentially serve to foster welcoming societies and change "hearts and minds" in local communities (e.g., the "I Welcome" Campaign). However, there are gaps in global media outreach around social issues that need to be improved. Media platforms are important for providing understanding of issues, exposing these issues to different populations, combating misinformation around the topic of migration, and fostering the creation of empathy. Participants therefore expressed an interest in establishing a communications network for committees at higher education institutions. This network would assist universities in creating spaces for dialogue and global citizenship curriculum and in communicating research findings to policymakers and the general public.

Participants also discussed networks that can be leveraged to amplify the desired narrative and message around migration. The media and communications aspect of the network could, for instance, be used to educate communication specialists and staff at universities, and to train/provide resources for refugees and migrants to tell their own stories. Multiple examples of partners and vehicles through which to engage were presented (e.g., see University of California, Berkeley's partnership with Amazon; University of Southern California Norman Lear Centre's Media Impact Project). A number of possible platforms include: social media campaigns, Op-eds, youth media forums, paid media, cable and streaming partners. The importance of engaging, training, and providing resources for high schools, Mommy bloggers, refugee and migrant representatives, and local communities was discussed. Finding the "in between" groups (i.e., those with conflicted/ambivalent opinions about refugee issues) is another solid strategy. *The Alliance can exchange information on existing and nascent media and communication projects, help support a strategic conversation on how to support universities wishing to do more on this front, and consider how to develop a more directed engagement with media outlets.*

Finally, participants recommended that an empowerment tool kit be tailored from one university to another. Research should serve to improve broader messaging and give a better picture of the realities of vulnerable migrants and unmet needs.

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## About the UARRM

The **University Alliance on Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM)** is a group of researchers, practitioners and policymakers seeking to harness the potential of university communities for the empowerment and protection of refugees and at-risk migrants in the United States.

Its mandate centers on higher education and vocational training for refugee and at-risk migrant students, threatened scholars (i.e., scholars fleeing conflict and/or repression), and, when relevant, members of their families.

The UARRM gathers vested parties across relevant sectors including migrants, refugees, student associations, the Academy, education think tanks, legislators, local government, ecumenical education institutions, and the international community.

The UARRM's **functions** are five-fold:

- Scope (map) existing efforts underway in the US by Action Area (below)
- Centralize updated information through a dedicated webpage (forthcoming).
- Communicate this information with interested partners inside and outside the Academy, helping to bring additional visibility to existing University-led efforts.
- Bring together relevant parties to take actions in these different areas.
- Help expand and/or spring-board promising initiatives.

The UARRM works across six areas of action ("Action Areas"<sup>4</sup>) in the United States (US) affecting refugees and at-risk migrants. These Action Areas are:

1. *Offering more legal pathways to the US for study/research/vocational training*
2. *Overcoming barriers to entry into higher education institutions in the US*
3. *Providing on-campus/in-community assistance and empowerment*
4. *Advocacy and awareness raising (Student to President)*
5. *Research*
6. *Media and Communications*

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<sup>4</sup> These Action Areas were consolidated at the State University of New York (SUNY) Brainstorming Meeting on November 29, 2017. See "Note on Outcomes: Expert Brainstorming Meeting," which captures the common goals and collective vision of the UARRM.

