

Protecting Academic Freedom and Higher Education Academies in Crisis: The Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education

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Higher education has far-ranging influence in any society, impacting its employment market, providing the potential for scientific and medical advancements, and helping to develop a healthy political system and civil society. By supporting the free flow of information and ideas, an informed and educated populace allows a country to compete and collaborate at a global level, making it essential to not only the stability and security of a country but also to that of its geopolitical region.

Threats or attacks to a country's learning and academic freedom can take many forms, including surveillance, imprisonment, or even violence against academics. All these forms have similar, dire results: decreased productivity, stagnation of civil society and political systems, and barriers to accessing the international academic community.

Often these threats are not unique to academia. Millions around the world face persecution by violent groups and regimes, and many are impacted by the same crises afflicting higher education communities. But when a scholar is killed or silenced, a lifetime of teaching and learning is lost that could provide thousands of hours of education for students, with all the benefits that produces for the community at large.

Providing safe havens that allow threatened academics to continue their scholarly pursuits uninterrupted is one way to protect vulnerable academics and academic communities. The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) offers such safe havens to scholars during times of targeted persecution and large-scale crises, thus preserving the lives, voices, and ideas of scholars around the globe. This support allows scholars to continue their research and teaching in safety outside their countries of threat. Once the threat

or period of instability has passed, they can return home to resume their work, often participating in the rebuilding of their nation.

Protecting Threatened Scholars

[Our] university has been honored to host several IIE-SRF scholars over the past three years. The scholars have not only contributed their knowledge and expertise in their fields of study, but have shared their lives with our community through their inspirational stories of resilience and persistence in the face of tragic events.

The IIE-SRF program is an important opportunity for universities and colleges worldwide to demonstrate their core values of academic freedom and discovery in practical and meaningful ways.

—IIE-SRF host from North America

Established in 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) is a global leader in the international exchange of students and scholars. IIE established its Latin America regional office in Mexico City in 1974. Aligned with IIE's global mission of advancing international education and access to education worldwide, IIE's work in Latin America provides access to educational opportunities for talented students as well as targeted training programs for current and future leaders to build professional skills vital to the region's economic growth. Centroamérica Adelante is an example of IIE's work in Latin America.

Funded by Seattle International Foundation, Centroamérica Adelante is a prestigious leadership development program that supports high-impact leaders driving social change in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

The program seeks to develop a strong professional network of influential leaders in Central America and support them in best leveraging their expertise to achieve transformational change in the region.

Almost from the moment IIE opened its doors, it has been aiding academics and university students throughout the world who have found themselves in precarious situations that necessitated assistance. With a commitment to defending the right to freedom of thought and the pursuit of knowledge, IIE assisted over 300 scholars who were barred from teaching, persecuted, or threatened with imprisonment in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1941 and more than 1,000 black South African students who were denied access to education between 1971 and 2001 under apartheid. In 2002, IIE formalized this unwavering commitment to persecuted scholars by founding IIE-SRF as a permanent program to support scholars from any country or academic discipline who face threats to their lives or careers. This support allows them to escape danger, relocate to a safe country, and continue their important work at institutions of higher learning.

There are numerous important benefits to protecting threatened scholars, including

- increasing the world's level of knowledge;
- enabling students in both oppressive and host countries to receive enhanced teaching services;
- promoting the continuation of research;
- encouraging the safe return of once-oppressed scholars to their initial home base; and

- enhancing scholars' freedom to identify, discuss, and disseminate their thoughts, research findings, and insights without constraints.

IIE-SRF supports scholars who hold a PhD or highest degree in their field, have extensive teaching and research experience at an institution of higher learning, and are facing or have recently fled from immediate and targeted threats. Scholars applying to IIE-SRF are selected for support by an independent Selection Committee that bases its decisions on three criteria: level of scholarship, level of threat, and strategic impact that making a grant to a particular scholar would have on his or her country and discipline. The goal is to save the lives, voices, and ideas of the most threatened and senior or promising academics around the world.

Threats to a scholar may emanate from different sources and manifest in a variety of forms. They do not always originate from a scholar's home government but can instead come from nongovernmental actors. A scholar may be threatened as a result of his or her political activities, sensitive research or writing, or identity. Other threats occur on a countrywide level, such as a pervasive anti-intellectualism sentiment that targets a nation's academia or a general civil conflict that impacts all individuals and facets of a society. Threats to academics also arise in varied forms. Some IIE-SRF fellows have faced imminent threats to their lives or those of their family members, others have survived assassination attempts or endured kidnapping and torture, while still others have been wrongfully imprisoned, harassed, or dismissed from their university positions.

The centerpieces of IIE-SRF's practical assistance are providing fellowship grants

of \$25,000 and arranging temporary, one-year academic appointments at host academic institutions outside of scholars' home countries where they can teach and/or conduct research. IIE-SRF's financial support is generally matched by contributions from these host academic institutions, which have included universities and research centers in regions around the world. The match funding model enables scholars, who are often cut off from financial resources in their home countries, to reestablish themselves as professors and researchers, and preserves their scholarship for the benefit of their home countries and host and intellectual communities. In addition to salary support, IIE-SRF helps scholars find these host institutions, provides access to necessary professional and personal resources, and assists them in adjusting to life in their host countries. If conditions in their home country have not improved, scholars are able to apply for a second year of funding, often remaining at their first-year host institution for a second year.

Threats to Scholars Globally

My family and I we are exposed to death everywhere we go, in the street and at home. Death and fear became lieutenants in our daily lives and do not separate us from them any break. Writing this letter took me [a] full day because of repeated interruption of electricity and communications, and so the process of scientific research and the teaching process is very affected because of these conditions.

—IIE-SRF alumnus from the Middle East/
North Africa region

Since 2002, IIE-SRF has responded to nearly 5,000 inquiries and applications from more than 130 countries, providing

academic fellowships to nearly 700 scholars from 56 countries. IIE-SRF fellowships have enabled these scholars to undertake visiting appointments at more than 350 partnering academic institutions in 41 countries. A significant number of IIE-SRF fellows have returned to their home countries or regions within five years of completing the fellowship. Those who are unable to return often continue to work with students and scholars back home and contribute to the academic life of their home countries, even when they cannot be physically present.

IIE-SRF fellows come from a variety of academic backgrounds, with approximately half (51 percent) of all grantees stemming from a humanities or social sciences discipline, including diverse fields such as political science, religion, and education policy. The remaining half of grantees (49 percent) specialize in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

The majority of IIE-SRF fellows (72 percent) hail from the Middle East or North Africa, especially due to the conflicts and higher education crises in Iraq and Syria. However, IIE-SRF has awarded fellowships to scholars around the globe, including sub-Saharan Africa (11 percent), East and Southeast Asia (7 percent), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (8 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (1 percent), and Western Europe (1 percent). The program aims to both respond to the large-scale higher education emergencies in specific countries and help individual scholars who are facing repression and violations of their right to academic freedom.

To fulfill its mission to help scholars wherever and whenever they are threatened, the IIE-SRF program is

committed to maintaining its global focus by conducting outreach efforts to all regions, including Latin America.

Scholar Rescue Fund and Latin America

Las situaciones excepcionales que motivan mi participación en el programa de “Scholar Rescue Fund” que Ustedes desarrollan están relacionadas con la persecución que he sido objeto a raíz de mis investigaciones que llevaron, en un primer momento a mi secuestro, judicialización y posterior situación de amenazas contra mi integridad y la de mi núcleo familiar.

—IIE-SRF alumnus from Latin America

In IIE-SRF’s 14 years of experience protecting threatened academics from across the globe, the program has supported Latin American scholars from countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. Nearly 90 percent of IIE-SRF Latin American fellows originate from a humanities or social sciences background, in fields ranging from political sociology to economics to communications.

The work of IIE-SRF builds on IIE’s long legacy of placing the protection of scholars and students at the core of its mission. Latin America’s academic community has been a part of this rich history beginning in the late 1930s, when Latin American universities hosted professors fleeing Spain’s Civil War of 1936–1939. Coming on the heels of three major revolutions in the 1920s and 1930s in Russia, Italy, and Germany, Spanish scholars encountered academic communities that had largely exhausted their absorptive capacities. Latin American institutions stepped up and took on this safe haven role, serving as host

campuses for exiled scholars, providing a safe academic environment where they could conduct work in Spanish, and ultimately saving many of these academics from severe threats in Spain, such as assassination or execution.

Avenues of Collaboration: IIE-SRF and the Latin American Studies Association

With this work, I hope to shine some light upon the complex historical conjuncture through which my country is passing, and reinforce an independent vision of our present reality.

—IIE-SRF alumnus from Latin America

IIE-SRF relies on regional partners within the academic and human rights communities to identify professors or senior researchers who may be eligible for support and require assistance. Historically, IIE-SRF’s networks within the Latin American higher education community have been relatively limited, perhaps hindering the program’s ability to identify and assist threatened scholars in the region. Through greater collaboration with groups such as the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), IIE-SRF hopes to identify if and where in the region scholars may need IIE-SRF assistance, both now and in the future.

Members of LASA can play an important role in supporting IIE-SRF’s work by providing region-specific expertise and advice, referring scholars who may require IIE-SRF support, and serving as safe havens for scholars seeking host institutions.

Providing region-specific expertise and advice

LASA’s members are uniquely positioned to provide knowledge of Latin America, including current events in the region that impact scholars and countries’ higher education systems or academic freedom more broadly. LASA members’ sharing of their expertise on specific countries would be instrumental to IIE-SRF in improving our understanding of the myriad challenges that may exist. In addition, such information would aid the program immeasurably in developing strategies both to respond to country-specific crises and to make assessments in individual cases.

As experts in their respective academic disciplines, LASA’s members can also be of great assistance in helping IIE-SRF understand the quality and significance of an applicant’s scholarship within the region. Such assistance may include advising on appropriate academic institutions, within Latin America or elsewhere, to host a scholar awarded IIE-SRF support.

Referring scholars who may require IIE-SRF support

IIE-SRF understands that the decision to apply for outside support and potentially leave one’s home country is extremely difficult for any individual. While he or she is the only one who can ultimately make this decision, friends and colleagues are often also aware of threatening circumstances that scholars may be facing in their home countries either to their academic work or the well-being of themselves and their family members. In such situations, IIE-SRF encourages LASA members to share information about the program with these colleagues, so that they

are aware IIE-SRF exists as a potential resource.

In addition, LASA members can directly refer to IIE-SRF professors or senior researchers who may be eligible for and in need of assistance by submitting an inquiry on their behalf. With a CV and short description of the scholar's situation, IIE-SRF can often make a preliminary assessment on eligibility before initiating the much more extensive application process and can accept such inquiries from friends or colleagues.

In the event that a potential applicant is unable to correspond with IIE-SRF directly, either because of limited English-language skills or security concerns, such as surveillance or being forced into hiding, IIE-SRF will work with a trusted intermediary. English-language proficiency is not a requirement of the IIE-SRF fellowship, and IIE-SRF is able to process applications in any language. However, because professional translation services can at times cause delays in application assessment, trusted intermediaries are often better positioned to help facilitate the application process.

Serving as safe havens for scholars seeking host institutions

LASA's members in both Latin America and North America can host IIE-SRF fellows at their academic institutions by providing a visiting academic appointment and contributing financial support to the position. The financial contribution generally takes the form of a stipend or other direct funding for the visiting scholar such as housing, airfare, and meal programs. In addition, host academic institutions provide other essential support services, including sponsoring the scholar's visa, if required; faculty mentoring and

staff assistance to help the fellow adjust to the host institution and local community; and access to university facilities and libraries.

Regional universities, colleges, and other institutions of higher learning are important partners for IIE-SRF. Given that "brain drain" can significantly harm a geographic region for decades to come, IIE-SRF seeks opportunities for keeping a scholar's intellectual capital within his or her home region, whenever possible. A regional placement affords a scholar the opportunity to assume a teaching or research appointment close to his or her home country, in a place that often has strong linguistic and cultural similarities, thus minimizing the adjustment to new communities and academic environments. This also allows for a smoother transition back into the scholar's country of origin once the period of threat has passed. In addition, host institutions in a scholar's home region can often facilitate securing a work permit or visitor visa more quickly, allowing the scholar to sooner leave the country of threat.

Fellowship placements are often tailor-made to fit the needs and circumstances of the scholar and could include a visiting position at a host institution in North America, if such a placement is complementary to the scholar's academic background.

Looking Ahead

Around the world, scholars are threatened daily by persecution and violence simply for exercising their right to academic freedom. Today's changing world has created the circumstances that give rise

to the need for organizations such as IIE-SRF and the Latin American Studies Association to work more closely together than ever before. IIE-SRF looks forward to continuing and enhancing our valuable partnership with LASA, and welcomes any suggestions from its membership for additional ways to improve our collaboration and support scholars in need of assistance.

Note

For more information on IIE-SRF, visit www.scholarrescuefund.org. ■