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Reviving the College Dreams of Afghan Women

A month after the Taliban abruptly banned women from colleges and universities in Afghanistan, U.S. institutions are trying to help them back into academe any way they can.

By Liam Knox

Afghan protesters in London after the Taliban's decree banning women from higher education last month. U.S. institutions are exploring ways to help those displaced from their programs.

Wiktor Szymanowicz/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Since the Taliban suspended the rights of Afghan women to pursue higher education last month, many American higher education institutions and leaders have decried the ban. A few are going further, asking what they can do to help Afghan women regain control of their academic futures, whether through scholarships to U.S. campuses, partnerships with universities in nearby countries or expanded access to online classes.

The Taliban's Dec. 20 decree had an immediate and chilling impact on women attending Afghan institutions. Armed guards strung barbed wire across campus gates in Kabul and stared down weeping female students. Dozens of male Afghan professors resigned in protest. Afghan women, who'd been worried about their opportunities since the militant Sunni Muslim ruling power took over the country in August 2021, saw their dreams of attaining a postsecondary degree quashed—no matter how close they were to earning it.

Jonah Kokodyniak, senior vice president for program development and partner services at the Institute of International Education, said it's the kind of assault on the values of higher education that prompts an international response. He said that while U.S. institutions have been welcoming to Afghan refugees over the past few years, he hopes the ban leads to renewed commitments to Afghan students.

"Maybe there is a complacency that's kicking in with respect to Afghanistan, now that we're more than a year beyond August 2021," he said. "Now is a real opportunity to galvanize efforts to support Afghan students that are able to come over safely."

IIE has been working to provide Afghan refugees with access to higher education since the Taliban took control in 2021, Kokodyniak said. In the months following the takeover, the organization gave more than 100 grants of between $2,000 and $5,000 to help Afghan refugees relocate and pursue a college education. It had since closed the grant program, but Kokodyniak said IIE is considering reopening it in light of last month's ban.

After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, Bard College committed to enrolling 100 Afghan refugees; last year Bard admitted 80 to its campuses in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; Simon's Rock, Mass.; and Berlin. Jonathan Becker, Bard's vice president for academic affairs, said that in light of the Taliban's ban on women in higher ed, the college is looking to expand its capacity to enroll more Afghan refugees, both in person and online. Other institutions, including Arizona State University, have also opened their doors to Afghans in need of refuge and educational opportunities.

Becker said he hopes to see more American institutions take steps to help the women recently deprived of higher education.

"We think American universities have the absorbent capacity to do more, and we're organizing around this right now, talking to leaders at other colleges and hoping their rhetoric is matched with action," he said. "We also know with the emergence of Ukraine, Afghanistan was already becoming old news soon after it began. We're trying to fight to keep its importance alive."

Pomona College is one institution hoping to lead its peers in the effort to help Afghan women. Pomona helped organize the Global Student Haven Initiative, founded in response to the crises in Ukraine and Afghanistan, which seeks to connect refugees and other people denied access to higher education with colleges and universities in the U.S. that can guarantee financial and academic support. Currently there are eight institutions participating in the initiative, including New York University and the California Institute of Technology.

Adam Sapp, Pomona's director of admissions, said the total ban on Afghan women in higher ed led the network to "double down on our work."

"One of the most important things colleges can do is just give a signal of welcome and acknowledge the role refugees have played in American higher education for

decades, ” he said. “We want to be the bridge where these students can feel normal again and focus on getting their education.”

Supporting Institutions in ‘Safe Haven Countries’

Of course, bringing Afghan women to America to continue their education is no simple feat. Shortly after the Taliban announced the ban, NAFSA, an association of international educators and foreign student advisers, released a statement urging the U.S. State Department to eliminate barriers for higher American education institutions seeking to sponsor Afghan refugee students.

“NAFSA believes that Congress should act immediately by expanding dual intent to Afghan women seeking a student visa to study in the U.S. and by providing Afghan women already here the opportunity to quickly apply for legal permanent residency status,” Jill Allen Murphy, NAFSA’s deputy executive director of public policy, wrote in an email to *Inside Higher Ed*.

But there are ways to connect Afghan women with American classes and degree programs even if they stay in their home country. Kokodyniak said that the push to help Ukrainian students after the Russian invasion last year led to new solutions, in terms of both online learning and regional partnerships, that could be useful for Afghan women seeking higher education.

The Asian University for Women—an international university based in Chittagong, Bangladesh, which has a large population of Afghan refugees—has been teaching Afghan women since 2021, when many fled the country. The American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan is another institution in a “safe haven country” that’s seen a surge in applications from Afghan women since the Taliban’s ban. Becker, who in addition to his role at Bard serves as AUCA’s acting president, said the campus currently enrolls over 300 Afghan students, most of them women.

Regional universities like AUW and AUCA are often easier alternatives for Afghan women than U.S. higher education institutions, since they're closer and student visas are more readily available.

"Scholarships to study at a U.S. university have an incredibly powerful role to play, but I think we also need to be realistic that the number who are able to do that, and the resources that will follow, will always be limited," Kokodyniak said. "There is a great opportunity for universities to think about how they can lead students either halfway in the region or to virtual classrooms."

Taking Online Classes 'Behind Closed Doors'

Thousands of refugees attend the University of the People, a nonprofit online university founded in Pasadena, Calif. Within a few weeks of the Taliban's decree, UoPeople received over 5,000 applications from Afghan women—the most it had received from the country since the Taliban takeover in 2021, according to university president Shai Reshef.

Reshef said that Afghan women were not ready to give up on their education, even if their degrees may be virtually worthless in their home country for the foreseeable future. Providing them with the tools to take classes online, he said, helps these women reclaim their sense of intellectual agency and empowerment.

"One of [our Afghan women students] wrote me an email after she was admitted where she said, 'I'd rather die than stop my studies,'" Reshef said. "When you are in a situation of instability, or where you don't know how the next day will look or what will be allowed in the future, online is, in a way, a great solution."

UoPeople also has experience teaching and serving students in high-risk areas. In addition to the 16,000 refugees from around the world enrolled in its classes,

UoPeople also reaches students in heavily monitored countries where accessing a higher education isn't just difficult but prohibited.

"We enable the students to study behind closed doors. We tell the students, 'Stay at home, don't open your door, nobody needs to know that you're studying,'" Reshef said. "Moreover, to avoid the risk that the Taliban will send someone to our classes, we allow students to use fake names. So Jane from California could be a woman in Afghanistan; only we would know, because we have the student ID number."

When the Taliban first regained power in 2021, UoPeople raised enough money to give 2,000 yearlong scholarships of about $1,200 each to Afghans who'd lost access to higher education. Now the university is trying to raise more funds for the influx of Afghan women applicants; so far they've raised about 200 scholarships' worth, but Reshef said he hopes donors—and other American institutions—see the importance of the current moment and rise to the task.

"So many universities have online programs, especially after COVID," he said. "It's easy, it's inexpensive, it's a fast solution. And I don't believe there is one university in the world that cannot afford to take at least a few Afghan women as online students."

However, there are still significant barriers to online access for those who remain in Afghanistan. Last year, Bard College began offering over 40 online courses to Afghan refugees through the Open Society University Network (OSUN), based out of AUCA, a Bard international partner. But Afghan women may even be unable to access online classes if the government is monitoring their internet use. Early this month, Becker and other Bard leaders met to discuss how to get around this potential problem.

"These are American seminar-style courses, using the best of the liberal arts classroom in an online forum," Becker said. "But a huge concern is whether Afghan women will have access to the internet going forward, and whether the bandwidth will be big enough to allow high-quality online teaching."

When she read about the Taliban's decree, Maria Estela Brisk, professor emerita of Boston College's School of Education and Human Development, knew she wanted to help however she could from a few continents away. Working with the Asian University for Women, she adapted a slate of graduate courses she's taught in the past—on linguistics and how to teach writing—into one six-week virtual course.

"I would do anything to support them. What is happening is so unfair," she wrote in an email to *Inside Higher Ed*. "The women who took my course had an undergraduate degree and had to give up high-level positions due to the circumstances in Afghanistan. It was a privilege to teach them."

Becker said the past few years have opened his eyes to the ways American colleges and universities could help students in crisis areas around the world continue their education—and the need for those efforts has only gotten more pronounced. The OSUN, for instance, was initially established as a global exchange program, but most students who use it cannot easily access education in their home countries.

"Our programs began as virtual international exchanges for people from around the globe to work with and for each other," Becker said. "Now we're having to adapt to their very great challenges, be they in Myanmar or Ukraine or Afghanistan."

"People wanted to support Puerto Rican students after Hurricane Maria, Afghan refugees after the Kabul airlift, Ukrainian students after the Russian invasion, and now Afghan women," said Sapp, of Pomona. "The important thing is that this work extends beyond the current crisis."

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