Student Advocacy Seminars

Educating the next generation of human rights leaders
Student Advocacy Seminars

Student Advocacy Seminars provide university and college students with the opportunity to develop human rights research and advocacy skills through direct engagement on behalf of threatened members of the global higher education community.

Arranged and supervised by local faculty in partnership with Scholars at Risk, each seminar takes on the case of one or more scholars facing unjust restrictions, prosecution, or imprisonment. This experiential program is tailored to each institution and group of students and is designed to give students a foundation in:

- Human rights research, standards, and mechanisms
- Organizing, campaigning, and advocacy
- Persuasive writing and speaking
- Leadership and teamwork skills

Over the course of the seminar, students gain a deeper understanding of both the value of the academic freedom they enjoy and the risks scholars and students around the world face in the pursuit of knowledge.

Scholars at Risk

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of institutions and individuals whose mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom.

Founded in 2000 and headquartered at New York University, SAR offers safety to scholars facing grave threats by arranging temporary academic positions at member universities and colleges.

SAR also provides advisory services for scholars and hosts, campaigns for scholars who are imprisoned or silenced in their home countries, monitors attacks on higher education communities worldwide, and leads with new tools and strategies for promoting academic freedom and improving respect for university values everywhere. SAR launched its first Student Advocacy Seminars in 2014.
Organizing a Seminar

Student Advocacy Seminars are available to all SAR member institutions. Interested faculty members and students can begin the process of organizing a seminar on the SAR website.

Faculty Supervisor’s Role

- Make administrative arrangements for the seminar (or other appropriate course format) and ensure compliance with local academic requirements
- Coordinate with SAR staff on case selection, advocacy guidelines, and case goals
- Meet regularly with students to discuss the case and coordinate research and advocacy efforts
- Coordinate with SAR staff on an end-of-seminar report and any advocacy events or visits

Students’ Role

- Research the case of one or more imprisoned scholars
- Set up a plan to monitor the case(s)
- Organize advocacy initiatives
- Prepare an end-of-seminar report and/or capstone event

SAR’s Role

- Coordinate with the faculty supervisor on case selection, strategy, background, and materials
- Connect faculty supervisor and students—when possible—with persons involved in the case
- Host periodic conference calls or webinars to discuss progress, share updates on the case, and answer questions about research and advocacy generally

Seminar Goals

- To impart practical human rights advocacy and leadership skills to students
- To bring attention to and educate officials about cases of imprisoned scholars and higher education communities under threat
- To educate the campus and community about academic freedom issues worldwide
- To raise awareness about the institution’s involvement with Scholars at Risk and its efforts to defend the human rights of scholars

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The following semester-long timeline provides a flexible framework that can be adapted for courses of differing duration, structure, and academic objectives.

**PRE-SEMESTER: PLANNING**

Before the seminar begins, faculty supervisor(s) and SAR share materials and discuss seminar basics including case selection, potential advocacy actions, the students' specific interests, and general goals.

**PROVIDED MATERIALS**

- List of potential focus cases, including case overviews, advocacy challenges, and opportunities for progress
- Information and training on how to advocate on behalf of at-risk scholars
- Sample syllabi
- Model alerts and letters of appeal
- Model student reports
- Introductions to human rights organizations and contacts who might be able to assist on the case
- Introductions to faculty who have led previous seminars

**ONGOING: SEMINAR MEETINGS**

Seminars meet throughout the semester, usually on a weekly basis. SAR staff is available to join seminar meetings via video or conference call 3-4 times during the semester to provide advice, troubleshoot research challenges, give practical advocacy guidance, and brainstorm next steps.

SAR encourages each seminar to identify a point person for communication with the SAR office and welcomes additional calls or emails from this representative.

**FIRST MONTH: RESEARCH & MONITORING**

Students select a case (or several), conduct research, set up a monitoring plan and schedule, and begin to draft a summary dossier.

**RESEARCH TOPICS**

- Human rights situation in scholar’s country of origin
- Scholar’s career as an academic
- Circumstances of scholar’s imprisonment
- Actions taken by human rights organizations, governments, and others regarding the case

**MONITORING PRACTICES**

- Setting up automated media alerts for relevant articles
- Setting up social media accounts to follow case stakeholders and informational sources
- Creating a reference list of key informational websites
- Reaching out to experts and human rights organizations with SAR’s assistance
- Creating a schedule for making check-in calls to case stakeholders
SECOND MONTH: ADVOCACY ACTION

Students identify advocacy opportunities, consult with stakeholders and experts, and take action. Faculty supervisor(s) and SAR discuss an awareness-raising end-of-semester activity.

ADVOCACY OPPORTUNITIES

- Writing emails and letters of appeal to government and non-government officials
- Hosting letter-writing and informational events on campus
- Writing articles for campus and local media
- Organizing social media campaigns
- Approaching government officials to issue letters and take additional action

See Successful Advocacy Strategies on pg. 7 for additional opportunities.

THIRD MONTH: END-OF-SEMESTER ACTIVITY & REPORT

Students organize and participate in an end-of-semester advocacy or awareness-raising activity and finalize their case report.

REPORT CONTENTS

- Summary of case(s), including background information and latest case developments
- Timeline of seminar’s advocacy activities
- Contacts or informational sources developed by students
- Assessment of most successful advocacy activities
- Recommended next steps for SAR staff

The students’ report becomes a part of the scholar’s file for reference in SAR’s ongoing casework.
Course Basics

There is no one-size-fits-all Student Advocacy Seminar. SAR assists faculty members and students to create an opportunity that fits their curricular needs and interests.

FORMAT

Student Advocacy Seminars can be conducted as small-group seminars, independent studies, or supervised internships. Past iterations have been organized as for-credit courses and as non-credit extracurricular opportunities.

DEPARTMENT & DISCIPLINE

Faculty members from a variety of departments and disciplines have incorporated the Student Advocacy Seminar program into their curricula. Human rights, political science, writing, literature, and other disciplines can serve as excellent academic homes for the program, with each bringing a different focus to the students’ work.

SERVICE LEARNING

SAR is delighted to partner with institutions as they incorporate service learning, community engagement, and experiential learning into their course offerings. In working with SAR, students have the opportunity to interact directly with all levels of SAR staff, develop a stronger understanding of NGO operations, and make a meaningful impact on SAR’s goals.

SAMPLE COURSE TITLES

- Seminar in Human Rights Praxis
- Politics of Humanitarian Action
- Human Rights Advocacy: Theory and Praxis
- Critical Human Rights and Humanitarian Advocacy
- Scholars and Journalists at Risk

Suggested Materials

An abridged list of suggested reading materials drawn from past seminars is below. For a complete list, please visit SAR’s suggested seminar materials resource page.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM


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**HUMAN RIGHTS**


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**ADVOCACY**


Amnesty International USA. “Writing an Appeal.” *Write for Rights.*


Taking Action

Students working with SAR have proven immensely creative in their advocacy efforts on behalf of imprisoned scholars. From viral social media campaigns to meeting government officials, there are ample opportunities to make a difference in a scholar’s case; these are just a few ideas.

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

Launch a week-long social media campaign calling on students to show their support through photos and statements of solidarity. Choose a strong, catchy hashtag and target your campaign to the right stakeholders, such as government officials and human rights organizations. See the Social Media Toolkit on pg. 10 for additional suggestions.

**CAMPUS EVENTS**

Inform and engage your community by organizing a lecture, panel, film, or tabling event on campus. Whether your event is more formal or more fun in nature, make sure it includes a tangible “ask” of participants that builds awareness of the case and your group’s presence on campus. Past successful events have included an in-absentia birthday party for an imprisoned scholar, coffee house-style discussions with SAR scholars, and letter-signing sessions at campus hot spots.

**PARTNER OUTREACH**

Connect with campus organizations and departments that have an interest in your case, such as the department where the imprisoned scholar’s expertise would be most valued, local Amnesty International chapters, human rights centers, and relevant academic associations. Prepare a case portfolio that presents the key facts as well as suggested actions that you can take together. Work with these partners to raise awareness over social media, sign and share letters of appeal, co-host a campus event, and get connected with allies on campus who can provide additional research and advocacy support.

**MEETING GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

Schedule meetings with government officials who can contribute their voices to your advocacy campaign. Your local and national representatives, senators, members of parliament, and their staff often care deeply about hearing from student constituents. In advance of your meeting, send copies of your case portfolio and carefully plan your tangible advocacy pitch, such as asking for a letter to an ambassador or foreign government. SAR organizes an annual advocacy day to coordinate meetings and provide pre-meeting training for students; see pg. 9 for more information.
Global Connections

With its network of over 500 member institutions in 37 countries, SAR is delighted to promote and facilitate collaboration among seminars and student groups. To date, Student Advocacy Seminars have taken place in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US.

**JOINT CAMPAIGNS**

Students in different seminars creating advocacy campaigns around the same cases can benefit greatly from collaboration and can use cross-seminar connections to amplify their impact. Past groups have launched joint social media campaigns, using the same hashtags and imagery to create momentum and awareness across state and national borders. As part of Student Advocacy Day (see pg. 9) and on their own initiative, seminars have joined forces for meetings with government officials, demonstrating the widespread support for their cases through their combined action.

**COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH**

While SAR is available throughout the semester to troubleshoot any research issues that may arise, other seminars can be a valuable resource for information on a case, country, or particular line of inquiry. SAR is happy to connect interested seminars for this kind of informational exchange, which also allows students to build their own networks with others interested in the human rights field.

**WEBCASTING**

By using Facebook Live and other webcasting platforms when holding events, seminars can reach beyond their home campus and invite other seminars to participate in, comment on, and share the broadcast.

**GUEST LECTURES**

Through the **SAR Speaker Series**, seminars have the opportunity to invite SAR scholars to give a guest lecture to their seminar and/or to the wider campus community. In addition, faculty members and students involved with student advocacy at other universities can offer a unique perspective, whether in person or over Skype.

**SAR GLOBAL CONGRESS**

Every two years, the network gathers for the **SAR Global Congress**. Student Advocacy Seminar participants are invited to attend the Congress to meet SAR scholars, advocates, and researchers; learn about the current state of global academic freedom; and present their own advocacy work as part of the conference programming.
From Theory to Praxis

SAR’s Student Advocacy Day convenes faculty and students annually to discuss advocacy strategies, receive lobbying training, and meet with elected officials to advocate on behalf of their selected cases.

SAR held the first Student Advocacy Day on March 9, 2017 in Washington, DC, and the second iteration will take place in Spring 2018. In the future, SAR looks forward to partnering with seminars outside the US to create international Student Advocacy Day opportunities.

“REMIND THEM THAT IDEAS HAVE NO LIMITATIONS, NO NATIONALITY, NO GENDER, NO RELIGION, AND NO RACE.”
— Azar Nafisi
SAR Ambassadors Council Member & 2017 SAR Advocacy Day Keynote Speaker

TRAINING

Student Advocacy Day provides seminar participants with the opportunity to learn from one another and to hear from speakers with significant experience and insight into effective advocacy strategies.

Students have the chance to present their cases to their peers, share their goals and challenges, and work together to problem-solve and brainstorm. Like-minded students from diverse campuses meet one another and build their community of human rights advocates.

The one-day training program prepares students for successful advocacy meetings with a wide range of public officials. Previous guest speakers have included representatives from the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, US Senate Staff, and the US State Department’s Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Students also have the chance to meet and hear from SAR scholars and higher education leaders about the importance of academic freedom advocacy.

ACTION

Following the training day, students meet with government and elected officials to make their case and generate support for imprisoned scholars.

On Capitol Hill, students have advocated on behalf of imprisoned scholars with the offices of their elected representatives, officials from the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and staff from partner human rights organizations. Their persuasive presentations have resulted in a range of successes, from signed letters of support to increased awareness and monitoring of scholars’ cases.
The Basics

SAR’s Social Media

Scholars at Risk maintains official accounts on Twitter (@ScholarsAtRisk) and Facebook (fb.me/scholarsatrisk) to inform followers of attacks on higher education communities; highlight advocacy initiatives, news, and events; and share higher education resources. SAR’s official accounts are also a way to share the important work of network members and students.

Social Media Branding

Student groups are encouraged to create account usernames that make reference to both their institution and SAR (see inset for ideas). Make sure that the group’s username and display name are not just “Scholars at Risk” so that your group has a distinct online identity. Refrain from creating an account that references a particular case; this makes it difficult to use the account in the long term and could result in lost followers.

Establishing an eye-catching, clear, and familiar visual presence is essential to attracting followers and building a movement. SAR encourages student groups to design profile and cover images that reflect their institutional identity and relationship to SAR. See the inset for logos from SAR and several student advocacy groups to inspire your own logo.

N.B. Please do not use a modified version of SAR’s logo or another student group’s logo without permission.

Engaging with SAR’s Online Community

SAR’s power lies in its network—the convening of higher education institutions, scholars, students, human rights defenders, and other individuals to protect and promote academic freedom. With so many groups working to this end, awareness of new advocacy actions, social media campaigns, and reports of attacks on higher education communities is essential. Once your group has been established, we ask that you and your members join Students for SAR, a Facebook group where members can share and brainstorm advocacy ideas, exchange resources and news, and show off the great work they are doing.

On Twitter, we recommend tagging or tweeting at SAR’s official social media accounts, other student advocacy accounts, and the relevant social media accounts tied to your campus (e.g. official school account, human rights centers, etc.). SAR has also set up a Student Advocacy Twitter list where your
group can find suggested research and advocacy accounts to follow for updates, contact with questions, and engage on awareness-raising campaigns.

You can increase your group’s following and build the conversation on both Twitter and Facebook by sharing and commenting on your followers’ posts. Similarly, when other users share one of your posts, recognize them with a “thank you!” or a “like.” You can also spark conversation by incorporating open-ended questions in your posts (e.g. Why should students care about #AcademicFreedom?).

Online Advocacy

Tracking the Issues

To stay on top of issues reported over social media, SAR recommends using TweetDeck, Hootsuite, or a similar social media dashboard that allows you to scroll through lists of Twitter users, hashtags, and keywords tailored to your group’s focus. In as little as five minutes, you can see a day’s worth of trends, conversations, and other organization’s tweets. Some of these dashboards also allow you to craft and schedule social media posts in advance. This is particularly useful when your social media team wants to prepare a “tweetstorm” or a large-scale campaign.

Another great way to stay on top of academic freedom news is to subscribe to SAR’s Academic Freedom Media Review and visit the Academic Freedom MONITOR for new incident reports.

Important Advocacy Dates

Below are just a few suggested dates that your group can use to call attention to imprisoned scholars, to promote stronger protections for academic freedom, and to honor victims of attacks on higher education. In addition to these dates, anniversaries of a scholar’s arrest or sentencing are powerful mobilization opportunities. SAR encourages groups to visit the MONITOR website and Scholars in Prison page for more advocacy dates.

Mid-March: Nowruz, Persian New Year
March 23: Anniversary of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
May 3: World Press Freedom Day
June 4: Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Protests, China
June 20: World Refugee Day

June 26: Anniversary of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
September: UN General Assembly
October 5: World Teachers Day
December 10: UN Human Rights Day
December 20: Anniversary of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Useful Resources

- Al-Fanar Media
- Amnesty International
- ARTICLE 19
- Chronicle of Higher Education
- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack
- Human Rights Watch
- Inside Higher Ed
- Front Line Defenders
- The Chronicle of Higher Education
- Times Higher Education
- University World News
Hashtag Strategy

When posting case updates, event announcements, or advocacy invitations, you can increase your exposure by adding a hashtag. Simply plug keywords related to your post (e.g. “Hong Kong” and “student activists”) into the Twitter search feature to find trending hashtags to add to your posts. If your group is brainstorming names for new campaign ideas, think of how the name can be turned into a hashtag (e.g. #FreeHamid or #SingaceHungerStrike). Once you agree on a campaign hashtag, be consistent in its use.

Popular SAR-Related Hashtags

#ScholarsAtRisk    #Free2Think
#AcademicFreedom   #Scholars
#Courage2Think     #HigherEd
#FreeExpression    #StudentRights
#ProtectTheUniversitySpace

Ideas for Action

Activists today have a seemingly unlimited number of ways to make change over the internet. Below are examples of social media advocacy from SAR and past Student Advocacy Seminars.

China #StateVisit Campaign

Roger Williams University’s (RWU) student advocacy seminar conducted a weeklong campaign around Chinese President Xi Jinping’s 2015 state visit to the U.S. RWU students took photos in front of quotes from prominent Chinese scholars in prison. SAR reposted these and included links to letters of appeal that the students and members of their network could sign.

Another way to capture your followers’ attention and brand your campaign is to create a simple, bold campaign graphic centered on a hashtag and supporting image or icon. For Xi Jinping’s visit, SAR created a simple rectangular graphic that used China’s state colors with the hashtag jumping out in the center.

Nowruz Campaign

SAR partnered with Amnesty Iran for their Nowruz (Persian New Year) campaign by sending messages of hope to Iranian scholars in prison. SAR staff took photos with their cards, and we included a short bio of the scholar in the final image. SAR encouraged followers to take part in Amnesty’s initiative and to sign SAR’s letters of appeal for the scholars.

#Free2Think

SAR, with the support of RWU, launched a movement around the hashtag #free2think to highlight the universal importance of academic freedom and the university space. Students, faculty, staff, and members of local and global communities took photos with their own #free2think messages. The hashtag has grown in popularity and is regularly incorporated into SAR materials and social media messaging.
Best Practices

SOURCING INFORMATION

Maintaining credibility is essential to any advocacy initiative. Keep your campaign followers’ attention by only sharing reports from credible news sources. A good rule of thumb when deciding to re-tweet or share updates is to cross-reference the post with several news sources. When in doubt, ask your faculty advisor or a SAR staff person for advice, or wait until new reports have been released.

INCORPORATING VISUALS

Using photos, infographics and even colorful text are great ways to grab your audience’s attention. SAR strongly encourages student groups to capture and share photos and videos of your campus activities over social media to show off your activism and maintain momentum around your case and issues of concern.

When available, your group should incorporate visuals that connect to your case. Family members may be willing to share personal images of imprisoned scholars. Images of the scholar, their university, or even the prison where they are being held may also be readily available online on websites including Wikimedia Commons, Flickr, or the Creative Commons.
Lasting Contributions

Student reports provide a valuable resource to SAR for its ongoing advocacy work on behalf of threatened scholars. The reports are added to scholars’ case files and referenced by SAR staff as new developments occur and new opportunities for advocacy arise. The following reports represent the culmination of a diverse group of seminars.

**ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY**

#FreeHamid

Report on Hamid Babaei, a PhD student imprisoned in Iran

*This seminar is a year-long course.*

**ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY**

The Book Club Case

Report on Domingos da Cruz, a legal scholar and journalist formerly imprisoned in Angola

*This seminar is a faculty-guided extracurricular opportunity.*

**FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY**

Cupcake Diplomacy

Report on Bekele Gerba, a foreign language professor imprisoned in Ethiopia

*This seminar is a semester-long course.*

**UNIVERSITY OF IOWA**

Report on Khalil al-Halwachi, an engineer imprisoned in Bahrain

*This seminar is a semester-long supervised internship.*