

Why Scholars at Risk has opened a US section

At a time of heightened tensions on campuses in the US, now is the time to increase protection of academic freedom, says Rob Quinn

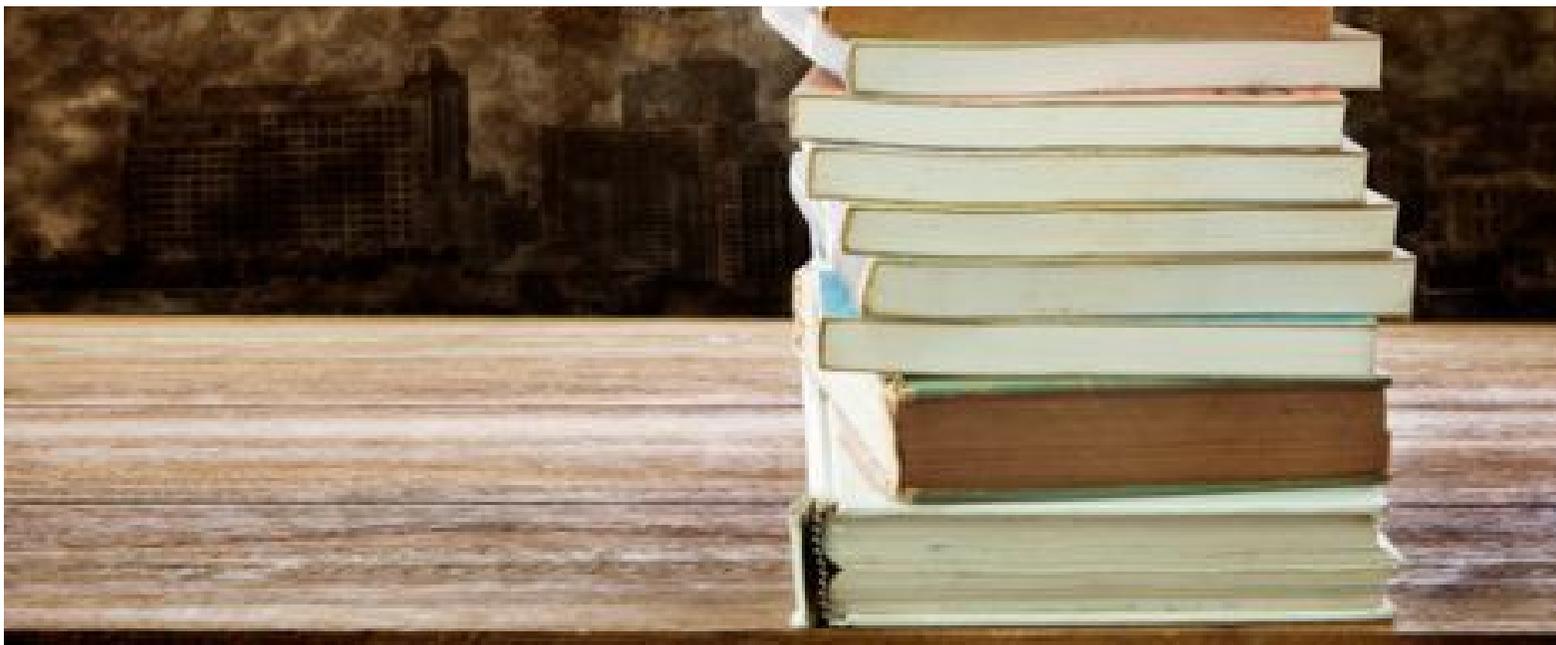
October 22, 2018



By [Rob Quinn \(/author/rob-quinn\)](#)

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Extending its work protecting threatened scholars and promoting academic freedom to more institutions in the United States, the international Scholars at Risk network has established a new US national section.

The move comes at a time of record attacks on scholars and universities abroad around the world – Turkey, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Yemen come to mind – and of heightened tensions on many US campuses.



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Those tensions shouldn't be surprising. Far from the caricature of an elitist ivory tower that antagonists of the academy love to conjure, higher education in the US is broadly representative of the American public in its income levels, race, nationality, immigration status, gender, religion and politics. Therefore many campuses exhibit the same tensions seen in US society.

More surprising is the way that these tensions have manifested on some campuses: surreptitious recording of lectures and meetings in attempts to capture out-of-context "gotcha" moments; profanity-laced social media posts, often snarky, sometimes hateful; protests and counter-protests with and without violent clashes; shouting down invited speakers; e-trolling of faculty, including racist, misogynist and homophobic slurs and even death threats; exposure of personal information online – even about children – as a means of intimidation; campaigns to disinvite, de-hire, and deny hiring or promotion; legislative initiatives aimed at curtailing administrative autonomy and sanctioning faculty and students.

Although relatively few people have participated in the most egregious of these activities, their actions have exposed a wider breakdown in respect for core higher education values, such as equitable access, accountability, academic freedom, autonomy and social responsibility.

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The new SAR-United States section will invite US universities, colleges and higher education associations to unite in support of those values.

SAR is perhaps best-known for its work arranging temporary positions at participating institutions for international scholars who face threats to their lives or work in their home countries. For almost two decades, SAR members in more than 40 countries have created more than 1,000 positions for scholars from every discipline, including many in the US.

In addition to arranging these positions for scholars, SAR also offers participating institutions a range of advocacy and educational activities aimed at building understanding of academic freedom and its importance not only to higher education but also to democratic society.

The section will also offer to US campuses a bridge to counterparts throughout SAR's global network of sections, along with partners in the United Kingdom with the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) and Belgium and the Netherlands with the Foundation for Refugee Students.

The chair of the SAR-United States section steering committee – Adam Braver, associate professor of creative writing at Roger Williams University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/roger-williams-university>) in Rhode Island – noted: “We have a responsibility to foster and protect the pursuit of knowledge.”

Before chairing the committee, Professor Braver developed an undergraduate course that became the SAR Student Advocacy Seminars. SAR programming has encouraged his students “to value engaging with the rest of the world” and has created solidarity with other academic institutions, he said.

Some of Braver's students have gone on to pursue careers inspired by their time in the SAR seminar. RWU alumna MacKenzie Brennan, for example, went on to law school. Reflecting on her time in the SAR seminar, she said: “I think it's really important that our generation – as we're coming of age in the political and working worlds – is aware of these injustices and actively fights to stop them. The increased level of investment [in the seminar] has spurred me and other students to stay involved and keep working. For many of us it will likely begin a lifetime commitment to advocacy.”

US institutions were among the founding members of SAR and have hosted many SAR-assisted scholars. And US higher education has an even longer history of action in support of at-risk scholars and students, from the Second World War scholars fleeing western Europe to scientists and dissidents fleeing the Soviet bloc; from Latin American intellectuals fleeing brutal dictatorships to students and scholars fleeing crackdowns in China after the Tiananmen Square protests and the former Yugoslavia under Slobodan Milošević.

Right up to today, US campuses have always tried to do their part. I am sure they always will and this new SAR-United States section magnifies that. What's new is that it offers a chance to help even more people through collaboration. And it offers a chance to push back against the disheartening conduct that we have seen on too many campuses recently, not with tit-for-tat intolerance and invective, but with a call to deeper meaning and higher ground: a call to reaffirm our mutual commitment to core values.

We invite every US higher education institution – large and small, two-year to four-year, public and private – to turn words into action, to join us in this new SAR-United States section and to stand up for the principles that ideas are not crimes, that critical dissent is not disloyalty and that everyone should have the freedom to think, question and share ideas.

Rob Quinn is executive director of Scholars at Risk.

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