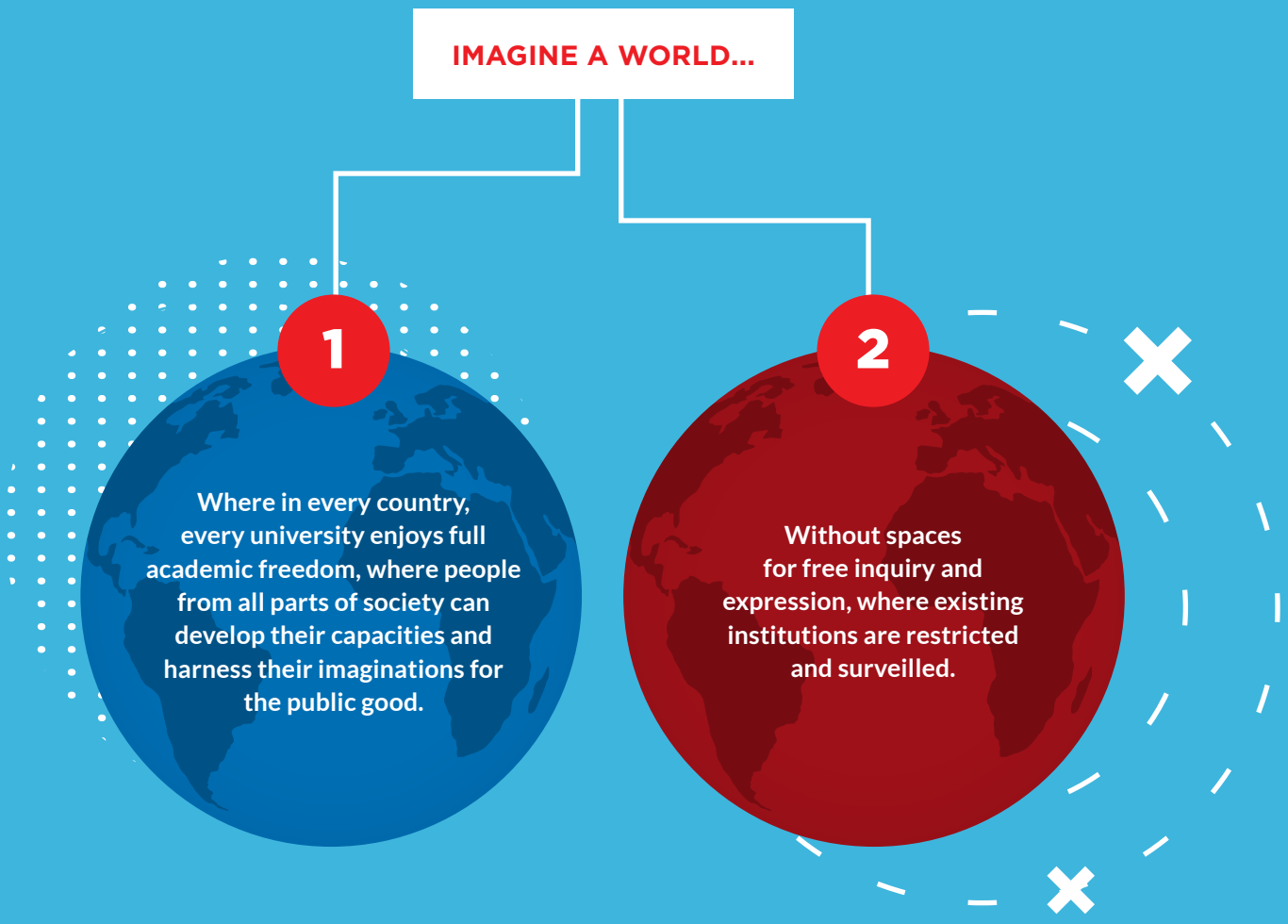
2023–2028

Strategic Plan

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK

protection advocacy learning



How would those two worlds differ? Which world do we choose for our children and grandchildren?

This simple thought exercise, this vision of a world of free institutions and scholars linked together in truth-seeking and knowledge, animated the creation of the Scholars at Risk Network and sparked a global movement in defense of everyone's freedom to think, question, and share ideas.

Executive Summary

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is a world leader in protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom. For more than 20 years, we have been undertaking important, necessary, and award-winning work. We have assisted thousands of important intellectual voices from all parts of the world and all disciplines. We have pioneered new casework, advocacy, and research activities. We have campaigned for scholars and students in prison and trained future generations to take up this work. We have documented attacks on universities and helped put academic freedom on the international policy agenda.

Under the guidance of our prior strategic plan (2018-2023), services for scholars increased 600%. Total positions arranged in a year grew 150%. Direct financial support leveraged for scholars grew 70% to over $8 million annually. SAR's monitoring project documented over 1,600 attacks on higher education communities worldwide. Network membership grew to over 650 institutions, and the number of national SAR sections grew from 9 to 17. Total revenues doubled to over $4 million, and total staffing to 30. We are proud of the progress we have made—as an organization, as a network, and as a movement. We are grateful to those who have joined us in this work. But there is still much to do.

SAR's new strategic plan (2023–28) builds on this momentum by focusing on three goals:

GOAL 1 **INCREASE PROTECTION:** More support for as many scholars and practitioners as possible.

GOAL 2 **BUILD SOLIDARITY:** Elevate and support national, regional, and global voices.

GOAL 3 **DEMAND IMPACT:** Stronger policies and implementation of academic freedom.

It will not be easy, but the path to a better future never is. We recommit ourselves to this vision. Through this plan, we stand with SAR network members. We stand with threatened colleagues and will do everything we can to assist as many as we can. We challenge ourselves to be more inclusive, innovative, efficient, and effective, even as we reach for a more sustainable, responsive, influential, and fully global SAR by 2035, committed to protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom everywhere.

Challenges

Threats to scholars and academic freedom are growing around the world. It is a testament to the essential role of scholars and universities in free societies—and to the need for SAR's work—that headlines are filled with reports of attempts to silence inquiry and to impose false narratives. Not since the 1930s have such large numbers of scholars and universities faced so many threats, whether from war and conflict, the pandemic, authoritarianism, or anti-democratic backsliding in places that had previously enjoyed relatively healthy levels of academic freedom. As a result, demand for SAR's services will continue to grow, with ever-larger numbers of scholars facing overlapping crises. We must innovate new models capable of supporting large numbers of scholars, even while we fight to increase protections so scholars do not have to flee.

AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban, who considers the idea of a knowledge-based, forward-looking society anathema, have effectively imprisoned half the population by denying education to women and girls and driven the most highly educated and diverse generation of Afghans ever into exile.

CHINA

Chinese authorities have used an extensive national and international surveillance apparatus to repress and intimidate scholars and students for engaging in activities critical of the government. China has also leveraged legal means to imprison and prosecute prominent scholars, particularly those from the Uyghur community.

UKRAINE

The Russian government's war of aggression on Ukraine is not only an attempt to eradicate the Ukrainian people, but an assault on evidence and truth. It depends on false vocabularies and histories, coercively imposed ideologies, and the direct targeting of those with the knowledge, skills, and courage to ask questions, including scholars and universities.

UNITED STATES

Attacks on inclusive academic spaces and evidence-based discourse are on the rise. Legislators have banned the teaching of disfavored topics and vilified academics and students in these fields. Local officials have removed books from classrooms and libraries. University presidents and governing boards have stripped the protections of tenure from faculty and cracked down on student expression.

Our Work

SAR responds to these challenges with three, mutually-reinforcing areas of activity: Protection, Advocacy, and Research and Learning.

Protection (casework) activities focus on providing direct assistance to threatened individuals, including traditional university academics as well as writers, artists, human rights defenders and other thought leaders ("practitioners at risk"). Protection services are the largest areas of SAR's work and include campaigning for individuals who are wrongly prosecuted, imprisoned, or otherwise restricted, counseling and referrals for legal, medical, or other services, and arranging and in some cases sponsoring temporary positions of personal and professional sanctuary at network-member institutions.

Advocacy activities promote academic freedom as a human right. Advocacy supports protection work by engaging network members, raising awareness of attacks, and promoting fundamental changes at the local, regional, national, and international levels. SAR's advocacy efforts include reporting on attacks on higher educational communities through our Academic Freedom Monitoring Project and the annual *Free to Think* reports. SAR coordinates Student Advocacy Seminars and academic freedom legal clinics to help train the next generation of advocates. SAR also campaigns for academic freedom protections at the UN, EU, Council of Europe, and other regional human rights and higher education systems, working alongside regional partners and coalitions.

Research and learning activities support protection by promoting greater understanding of academic freedom issues within higher education communities and with the public. SAR supports scholarship about academic freedom through research fellowships and publishes educational materials like the *Promoting Higher Education Values* handbook. SAR also raises visibility of academic freedom through the *Free to Think* podcast and online course *Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters.*

The Network

Scholars at Risk's greatest strength is our network. SAR brings together the largest network of higher education institutions and actors ever organized specifically to protect threatened scholars and promote academic freedom.

At the center are the SAR secretariat offices in North America and Europe, whose staff support the network of higher education institution members, affiliate members, national SAR sections, partner networks, regional coalitions, working groups, and project partners, all of which are in formal relationship with the secretariat, and through it with each other.

Around this core network is a wider community of peer and partner organizations and programs engaged in parallel activities or in direct collaboration with SAR or each other, including other programs offering assistance to threatened scholars, or other projects engaged in academic freedom research or advocacy.

Even wider still, beyond formal entities, is a movement of persons and groups that are aware of SAR activities, whether in formal relationship with SAR or not, and who share common purpose with SAR's mission of protecting threatened scholars and promoting academic freedom.

SAR's strategic plan recognizes these various frames—secretariat, network, community, movement—as strengths to build upon. The plan seeks to inspire actors at each level, even as it attempts to anticipate, harmonize, and build on these combined efforts.

"SAR has spurred the growth of an ever-expanding constellation of people and organizations working to protect academic freedom."

ROBERT QUINN
Executive Director
Scholars at Risk

2023–2028 STRATEGIC PLAN

SAR's 2023–2028 strategic plan builds on SAR's decades of experience responding to attacks on higher education, foremost by assisting threatened colleagues. It draws input from SAR's global network and our expansive community of supporters and partners. It builds on the achievements of the last five years, during which we have grown our network and our services, even as we race to meet current and emerging challenges.

THE PLAN

Our vision is a world where every scholar in every university in every country enjoys full academic freedom, where people from all parts of society can develop their capacities and harness their ideas for the public good. It will not be easy, but the path to a better future never is. To reach this vision, over the next five years SAR will focus on three goals:

GOAL 1 PROTECTION

At-risk scholars and practitioners worldwide are protected through residential and remote fellowships, support grants, advice, and referrals.

SAR's core mission is increasing protection and helping as many scholars and practitioners as possible. This requires expanding our network and strengthening services for network members who do the direct work of hosting colleagues on their campuses.

Specifically, this means investing in national **SAR sections** everywhere, including building up the **SAR United States section** to match growth elsewhere and to capture opportunities to help even more scholars.

SOLIDARITY

Higher education communities worldwide gain voice, agency, and support in promoting academic freedom at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

SAR builds understanding of threats to scholars and academic freedom worldwide—not just as isolated incidents—but as part of a broad pattern demanding an organized, global response. This requires supporting local actors, strengthening regional coordination, and innovating joint strategies at the regional and global levels.

Specifically, this means investing in the **International Advisory Committee** of network-member representatives, building up **SAR Europe**, embracing and deepening partnerships, and cultivating regional coalitions for academic freedom advocacy and education across the Global South.

IMPACT

Stronger policies and implementation of the right of academic freedom at the national, regional, and global levels yield visibility, understanding, and protection.

SAR raises the visibility of threats to scholars and universities to create and capture opportunities for positive change. This requires refining our global advocacy objectives to move beyond calling attention to academic freedom principles and violations, and towards the implementation of the right and strategies for holding states, responsible parties, and violators accountable.

Specifically, this means streamlining monitoring and reporting, improving campaigns for imprisoned scholars and students, increasing targeted, data-driven UN and regional advocacy, and promoting authoritative guidance and models for implementing academic freedom.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO

To achieve our goals, we must develop SAR as an organization, network, and movement, focusing not only on ***what*** we do but ***how*** we do it.

Specifically, we need to:

- **Strengthen communications** to improve storytelling about SAR scholars and our work
- **Deepen our use of metrics** to inform decision-making and demonstrate impact
- **Close gaps in critical functions** including fundraising, finance, and communications by doubling total SAR revenues to $9M by 2028 and prioritizing unrestricted funds that allow flexibility to innovate and respond to opportunities efficiently and effectively
- **Regularly review and 'refresh' core activities** to meet member needs and capture opportunities to help more scholars, even while serving at least 500 scholars and arranging at least 300 positions annually by 2028
- **Refine SAR's advocacy objectives to better track our impact**, with the goal of securing meaningful recognition of academic freedom by the United Nations, Council of Europe, Organization of American States, and African Union by 2028
- **Invest in our staff by prioritizing training, career development, and wellness**, including a healthy network-wide culture and meaningful commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion
- **Model the highest standards of governance and leadership**, including by developing the SAR board, tracking progress on strategic plan goals, and planning for transitions in key roles
- **Deepen and expand our engagement with donors**, including governments, foundations, civil society organizations and private individuals who share our vision and support our work
- **Develop models for the financial sustainability of SAR** sections and regional coalitions
- **Build up long-term operating reserves to $2.5M by 2028** and develop a planned giving and endowment strategy to ensure SAR's long-term capacity to protect scholars and promote academic freedom worldwide

Through this plan, we stand committed to protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom everywhere.

HOW WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

At Scholars at Risk, our work is rooted in a three-part theory of change focused on legitimacy, accountability, and norm-creation.

By assisting threatened scholars, we not only help protect their lives, careers, and ideas, we affirm the legitimacy of their work and challenge the legitimacy of those acting against them. By raising questions about higher education values, we reaffirm the legitimacy of the values themselves and strengthen the hand of local scholars, advocates, university leaders, and state officials who are trying to raise similar questions. Legitimacy work does not produce change directly, but it provides a foundation for dialogue and encourages more actors to get involved.

Accountability work—like SAR's *Free to Think* reports and Scholars in Prison campaigns—informs the dialogue with data and demands redress and improvements. Change can result from such demands, especially for individual victims, but accountability work generally does not produce broad change either.

Broad change comes from norm-creation, when participants in and targets of activities aimed at legitimacy (e.g., conferences, workshops) and accountability (e.g., reports, campaigns) are influenced in their behaviors to adopt new policies, practices and cultures. Scholars at Risk's protection, advocacy, and learning work ultimately aim for this deeper impact from norm-creation. Protection work holds a mirror to violations in badly-behaving states. Advocacy work presses generally well-behaving states to increase protection for higher education communities under threat, including increasing accountability for attacks on university communities. Learning work focuses both on engaging local human rights advocates to take up these issues and on training local members of the higher education sector to be more active and vocal about including issues of higher education security and values in their cross-border activities and at home.

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NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

GIVE TODAY

To give, scan the QR code or visit:
www.scholarsatrisk.org/give-today

SCHOLARS AT RISK depends on the generous financial support of friends inside and outside higher education communities to sustain our work. Gifts of any size are appreciated, including gifts in honor or memory of others, matching gifts, and legacies.

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