



Teaching Tragedy: Toward a Pedagogy of Accountability—The Every Campus A Refuge Model

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In 2015—at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis—I was struggling with how to leverage my position as a tenured professor of English at Guilford College to respond in any meaningful, material way to this global calamity.¹ A small Quaker liberal arts four-year institution in Greensboro, North Carolina, Guilford was the perfect place—in its ethos and history—to found an initiative like Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR), which advocates for housing refugees on campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement.

¹This paper is part of a larger project on other models the author is working on with Dr. Rima Abunasser.

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Like all liberal arts colleges, Guilford believes and aspires to the values of a community with a diverse membership who are treated, and treat each other, equally. As a Quaker institution, however, Guilford also emphasized integrity, justice, and stewardship. While “equality” and “diversity” were buzzwords I had heard frequently from higher education institutions, these were not. And as a second-generation Palestinian refugee born and raised in Jordan, and later an Arab and Muslim immigrant to the U.S., “justice” was personal and emotional for me—the dream of and for justice and a just world animated my refugee family’s lived experiences and our daily narratives. Coupled with the college’s Quaker heritage’s conceptualization of “stewardship”—a responsibility for and over our resources that required their use in ways that are good and right—“justice” found its vehicle. It was no longer an abstract concept waiting to be embodied in some one, some group, some act, some *thing*. Indeed, it had a ready form—the space and place of Guilford College itself.

And Guilford College had done so before. The Underground Railroad ran through the woods of the college; nearby Quakers provided sustenance to the escaping slaves, who were hiding in the trees’ expansive roots, and smuggled them up North.² Thus, it could be again a place of intentional refuge for those fleeing injustice. But to do so with integrity meant that we needed to do this work in ways that understood our accountability as a predominantly white institution operating within and animated by white structures, whether these be academic, the U.S. government’s policies and practices, or our country’s colonial and imperial histories and contexts. Guilford College did not admit black students until 1962³ and is built in a region that belonged to indigenous tribes. So, while hosting refugees on Guilford’s campus could be easily seen as an extension of the institution’s core values and historical legacy, the effort must also be *rightly* seen as necessitated by another legacy we have inherited—that of empire-building, colonialism, and global politics that have displaced and dispossessed the indigenous peoples of this land and others around the globe.

Hence, as an institutional initiative, ECAR was designed to engage in these meaningful acts of solidarity while simultaneously subjecting them

²Lauren Barber, “An Underground Railroad station emerges near Guilford College,” *Triad City Beat*, February 14, 2019, <https://triad-city-beat.com/an-underground-railroad-station-emerges-near-guilford-college/>.

³“Race Relations at Guilford College,” UNC Greensboro Digital Collections, n.d., <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/essayguilford/collection/CivilRights>.

to rigorous self-awareness and criticism. This quest for accountability—to steward resources to do just things not because we can but because we must—is one that necessarily centers the “Other.” This chapter will detail the ECAR hosting initiative and the attendant curricular and cocurricular components, showing how they—in their best practices, processes, and policies as well as in the curricular components’ readings, assignments, and projects—transcend poverty tourism and the spectacle of tragedy to focus on accountability toward hosted refugees, centering their agency, privacy, and dignity.

THE ECAR MODEL

ECAR was inspired by a very basic idea: radical hospitality. Indeed, I stole it from Pope Francis who, shattered like the rest of us by the image of the four-year-old drowned Aylan Kurdi, called in the fall of 2015 on every parish in Europe to host a refugee family. A simple thought occurred to me then: isn’t a college or university just like a parish—a small city bound by shared values—with everything necessary to support newcomer families (housing, cafeterias, clinics, career services, human resources, etc.)? The idea was also inspired by my own Arab background and refugee heritage. The word for a university or college “campus” in Arabic is *haram* “حرم”; it means a physical space that is both “sacred” and “inviolable,” a sanctuary, a refuge. This, along with my Palestinian parents’ and grandparents’ experiences in Jordan—ones where difference was emphasized and felt, belonging was elusive, and “home” was never found—undergirds the ethos of Every Campus A Refuge. Here, the “ivory tower” exclusivity of college and university campuses can be fundamentally upended so that the newcomer’s belonging rather than difference was centralized, and the campus we speak of and imagine as safe is not only so for those who seemingly “belong” there, but for others in our community.

So that fall of 2015, I walked into Guilford’s president’s office and asked for a college house to host refugees. She agreed, and ECAR was born. We partnered with community organizations, including our local refugee resettlement agencies, to design a refugee hosting initiative built around the needs of the refugees. To center those needs, we steward every possible resource at our community’s disposal: free campus housing, utilities, Wi-Fi, and use of college facilities and resources (classes, gym, library, career center, cafeteria, etc.). We do so in ways that align with our hosted guests’ interests and individual desires. For example, Ali

Al-Khasrachi—the artist and calligrapher father of the Iraqi family our campus hosted for eight months in 2017—used a private studio and supplies provided by Guilford’s Art Department. His completed works were then exhibited on campus and picked up by a gallery in downtown Greensboro. Other hosted individuals’ requests and needs were similarly centralized in the services provided (musical instruments and support, sports and athletics, etc.). One of ECAR’s major goals is to ensure meaningful resettlement where refugees thrive rather than simply survive. This goal can be achieved only if the hosted individual’s needs, interests, passions, and personal goals—rather than our own—guide the process of hosting and support.

This support comes from a cadre of 125+ trained student, faculty, staff, and community member volunteers. Volunteers also provide airport welcome, prepare campus housing, raise and collect funds and in-kind donations, share meals, act as cultural brokers, provide interpretation, make important resettlement appointments (DSS, medical, etc.), and assist with childcare, job-hunting, shopping, transportation, filling out government forms, finding off-campus housing, and moving. When hosted guests transition off-campus, ECAR pays their security deposits, first month’s rent, and utilities setup. Support for each hosted family continues after they move off-campus, as volunteers continue to assist with goals set during the hosting period such as acquiring the GED or driver’s licenses. Willing and trained volunteers bring their skills, passions, disciplines, expertise, and resources to this asset-based community of practice that provides a softer landing and stronger beginning for refugees resettling in U.S. cities. Regardless of endowment size or available funding, all colleges and universities are resource-rich in these ways. Ultimately, this work involves existing brick and mortar, human and material resources already doing the same work for students, and students themselves, who would have been volunteering elsewhere.

Since January 2016 and as of this writing, we have hosted 86 refugees on Guilford’s campus—38 of them children—from Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Uganda, Rwanda, the DRC, Colombia, CAR, Afghanistan, and Venezuela. We are currently hosting a six-member family. Typically, families stay for an average of five months, at which point (employed and with SSN) they are able to resettle more successfully in their chosen communities in Greensboro. There are 13 other ECAR campuses, including Wake Forest University, Washington State University, and Old Dominion University;

they have collectively hosted more than 150 refugees.⁴ At the Guilford College chapter, we use surveys and questionnaires to solicit feedback from both hosted guests and volunteers about their experiences, so that we may continually center those experiences as we reflect on and refine the initiative's best practices. These have been compiled in a Best Practices Manual that is regularly updated and shared with interested schools to ensure that they adopt the program in effective, ethical ways: empowering the community partner and their refugee clients—and safeguarding the guests' privacy, dignity, and agency even while engaging and educating the campus communities.

Hence, ever since its inception, ECAR was always *about* and *for* the "Other," rather than about or for our students, allowing for a decolonizing approach to "service-learning." While the volunteer students' learning happened, it wasn't the cause and it wasn't the reason. ECAR was not created to meet students' educational needs nor the institution's curricular and cocurricular goals. Our hosted guests' needs were prioritized, especially the primary need for safe, affordable housing, which is rare for current residents of the U.S., let alone newcomers who lack the credit background or Social Security numbers to secure it—and whose one-time stipend of \$1000 and three-month expectation for self-sufficiency promotes failure, not success.

In many ways, ECAR also flipped the traditional service-learning model where institutions often train students in "real-world" scenarios at the expense of overburdened community partners and organizations who, frequently understaffed and underfunded, must also navigate educating our volunteer students. The ECAR initiative inverts this model: students are no longer going *out there*; rather, we are bringing the community into *our space*, thus reframing for whom campus space can and should be used. And rather than a testing or training ground for our students, our community partners are co-educators and co-trainers. In the ECAR model, the institution's partnership with a refugee resettlement agency and frequent collaboration with other local organizations, service providers, and nonprofits stimulate important conversations centered on collective community-building and consciousness raising.

⁴During the Afghan evacuee/refugee crisis in the fall of 2021, many other campuses joined the initiative including, for the first time, public institutions.

THE CURRICULAR COMPONENT

In 2017, I realized that I could strengthen ECAR's impact and longevity by institutionalizing and formalizing the initiative by embedding it in the curriculum. This was a way to guarantee its existence as well as ensure that the model was grounded in what the institution valued most—its academic and curricular offerings. As a Guilford College Center for Principled Problem Solving (CPPS) Fellow, I designed two minors that were offered out of the CPPS. These Principled Problem Solving Experience (PPSE) Minors—"Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR)" (Fall '17 to Spring '19) and "Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies" (Fall '19 to Spring '21)—required 16 credits over two years and allowed students to study, in intentional ways, global and local issues of forced migration and refugee resettlement while earning credit for the work of hosting refugees on campus and supporting them in resettlement. For these minors, I created a variety of new courses that focused on refugeeism and forced displacement (PPS 150 and PPS 250); on local efforts in refugee and (im)migrant support (PPS 151 and PPS 251); and on refugee and immigrant literature (ENGL 350). The minor facilitates students' learning about what forced displacement is and why it happens; centralizes the voice, agency, and perspectives of the individuals who experience it; emphasizes how we can collectively organize and advocate to address the problems of forced displacement and resettlement; and does the work of principled problem-solving in refugee resettlement through the following course offerings:

- I. PPS 150 or 151: Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies I
- II. PPS 250 or 251: Forced Migration and Resettlement Studies II
- III. One course focused on understanding the causes for forced displacement and (im)migration (many choices from offerings across the college).
- IV. One course focused on the voice, agency, and perspectives of (im)migrants and displaced individuals (many choices from offerings across the college).
- V. One course focused on building community, advocacy, organizing (many choices from offerings across the college).

This variety of required and elective courses involved a collaborative team of several faculty members from various departments and disciplines. Instructors designed a required course assignment that engaged students

in making and reflecting on connections between their learning in the course and their work with ECAR. Students experienced refugee voices and narratives by engaging in conversational interactions with refugees through NaTakallam, a nonprofit that employs forcibly displaced individuals by connecting them with students for conversations over Skype. This component centralizes refugee voices and experiences without exploiting the particular refugees we host on our campus or mining them as resources for our benefit, and with whom “educational conversations” are not expected nor enforced. If these conversations do happen, they should be initiated by the hosted guest; the volunteer must uphold utmost privacy and confidentiality about such conversations. Student volunteers are also vetted/background checked and sign confidentiality agreements regarding interactions with their clients. We also center hosted guests’ needs by asking students to design and implement an advocacy, problem-solving, or other type of resettlement and (im)migrant support project derived from their learning experiences in the program and on which future students can build—centering the stated need of the community (hosted guests and partners). This project should align with each student’s inter/disciplinary training, their skills and passions, and their vocational and personal goals.

The recent increase in student activism on American college and university campuses under the leadership of students of color, especially women, LGBT, and gender nonconforming community members, has revealed the racist and colonialist framework of even the most liberal educational models, including those built around student-centered teaching and learning and which take as their core ethos the urgency to represent and uplift the underrepresented experiences of marginalized voices. Making trauma-informed narratives more visible at predominantly white institutions means navigating such important tasks “under western eyes”⁵ which—unless approached with an eye to accountability—could potentially contribute to a culture of fetishization; instead of simply teaching “under western eyes,” we might also be unwittingly teaching “*for* western eyes.” Hence, a pedagogy of the oppressed is no longer enough. There is a pressing need for a pedagogy of accountability, one that acknowledges the location of the learning space and the identities of those who inhabit it. The ECAR PPSE Minors were designed carefully to work against fetishization by highlighting structural racism and institutional

⁵To borrow Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s use of the phrase.

accountability, decentering the student learning experience, and recentering the needs and lived experiences of the hosted guests. However, such a pedagogy—one of accountability—should extend beyond the curricular, indeed even beyond the cocurricular, to institutional practices, policies, and positionalities.

As institutions of higher learning, we do not simply strive to teach our students. We engage in pedagogies that model for the larger communities we are part of (physically and socially—our towns, cities, states, and countries, our alumni, peer and aspirant institutions, prospective students, etc.)—what community *ought to be*. And we also acknowledge that we are part of systems that *ought not to be* and *ought never to have been*. After we acknowledge, we must then *do* something about those systems. We can create communities that aspire to what ought to be. We can create communities that hold themselves accountable for the pasts that should never have been and the presents that still are. Hosting refugees on campus grounds and supporting them in their resettlement is just such a pedagogy that converts accountability to justice, exclusivity to inclusivity, and exclusion to integration.

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