

BENNINGTON

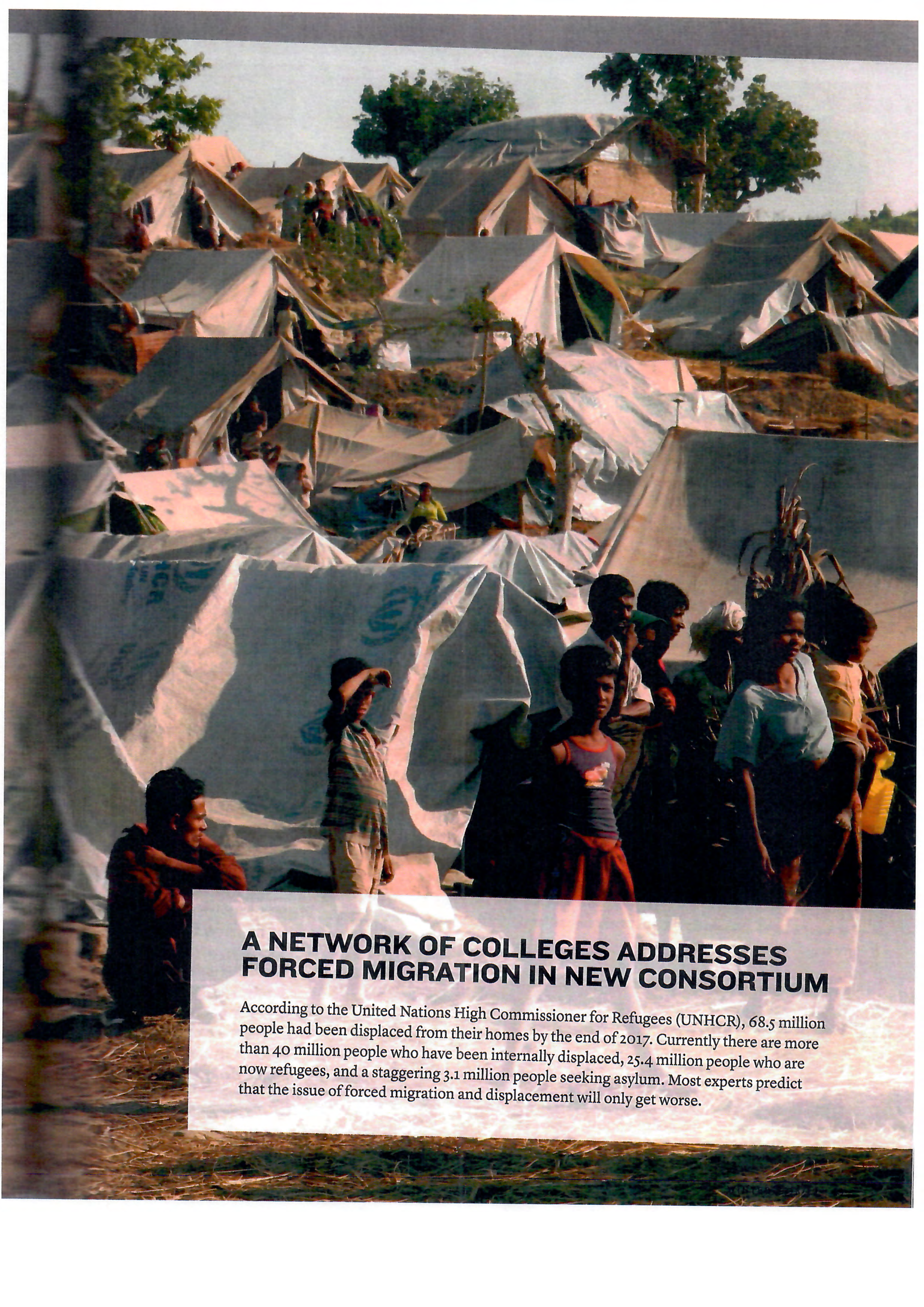
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NETWORKS

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Bennington, Bard, Sarah Lawrence, and Vassar form a new consortium to deliver the first liberal arts undergraduate study of forced migration and displacement. Reporting by Elisa Shoenberger





A NETWORK OF COLLEGES ADDRESSES FORCED MIGRATION IN NEW CONSORTIUM

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 68.5 million people had been displaced from their homes by the end of 2017. Currently there are more than 40 million people who have been internally displaced, 25.4 million people who are now refugees, and a staggering 3.1 million people seeking asylum. Most experts predict that the issue of forced migration and displacement will only get worse.



In April 2018, faculty members, staff, and students from the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement and Education met in CAPA's Symposium continuing work to develop new, horizontal, more egalitarian models to address the refugee crisis.

Enter Bennington, Vassar, Bard, and Sarah Lawrence. Two years ago, the colleges formed the Consortium on Forced Migration, Displacement, and Education (CFMDE). Recognizing the power in bringing together a mindtrust of faculty members, staff, students, and alumni from not just one, but four colleges known for their interdisciplinary approach, the group looked to develop a consortium that would address the issue of forced migration absent silos and rhetoric.

"If we are going to solve the crises of forced migration and displacement today, it's going to take students, scholars, activists seriously engaging these issues through a range of interdisciplinary lenses," Bennington faculty member **John Hultgren** explained. "We've got to be putting economics into the conversation with politics, with environmental sciences...and the role that arts can play in promoting social change."

A comprehensive, interdisciplinary, liberal arts undergraduate study of forced migration and displacement was a need seen not only by Bennington, Bard, Sarah Lawrence, and Vassar College, but by major foundations that hoped to address similar issues.

In 2016, supporting the start of the Consortium's work, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation granted \$135,000 for planning to the group. This past fall, compelled by the planning, the Consortium was able to secure a significant \$2.5 million grant from the Mellon

Foundation. The \$2.5 million will go toward a four-year implementation plan.

Together, faculty members from all four colleges meet quarterly to discuss the work. At this early stage the focus is on academic and logistics planning. Soon the group will turn their attention to developing a single shared class, "Lexicon of Forced Migration." Students at any of the CFMDE institutions will be able to register for it in the spring.

In addition to the shared class, each of the colleges offers classes specific to their curriculum and tailored for their students on forced migration. In the last academic year alone, Bennington offered 14 classes on the issue, including International Human Rights Law, Geographies of U.S. Empire: Immigration, Race, and Citizenship, and Migration, Diaspora and Exile: New Voices in the Literature of Global Dislocation. And punctuating these classes are pop-up courses. This past fall a four-week pop-up course, Land of Immigrants, was co-taught by President **Mariko Silver**, CAPA Director **Susan Sgorbati**, **John Hultgren**, and **Eileen Scully**. The course was student-initiated in response to Trump's Separation Policy crisis, which separated migrant, asylum-seeking children from their families. The class brought in many speakers to understand the underlying issues of the crisis. At Bard, migration courses span the curriculum with courses such as Spaces of Exception: Migration, Asylum-Seeking, and Statelessness Today offered in

philosophy and political science, while courses such as *Sacrifice Zones: How Climate Disruption Can Lead to Forced Migration*, are offered in environmental science.

And while most will students will spend a majority of their time learning on their home campus, a major benefit of the Consortium is that students can work with faculty members at other schools if they have a particular specialty that is absent at their institution. And that network of experts to study with is only growing. The Consortium has now partnered with the Council for European Studies at Columbia University to feature the work in their digital journal *EuropeNow*.

There are also study abroad opportunities. Students at the four schools can attend Bard's Berlin campus for either a semester or a year to study and learn about forced migrations. Sarah Lawrence is in the process of developing two different study abroad opportunities for students. The first would be a four-week study abroad with the working title *Migrant Ethnographies in the City in Malaysia* and another in Bern, Switzerland that would look at issues of mental health and forced migration. Both study abroad courses are to be launched in the summer of 2019 and will be available to all students. During these trips, students would be expected to conduct interviews and observations at local and international organizations, schools, and residential neighborhoods, among other places.

Assistant Professor of Sociology at Sarah Lawrence, Parthiban Muniandy explains, "Both the goals of the Consortium and the Mellon grant support new integrated projects and initiatives. While we have bigger signature projects, I think there is a lot of space for new developments, programs, and projects, organized by faculty and students. This will be an ongoing thing for the next four years."

And outside of course offerings, CFMDE has held several programs, including conferences where visiting refugee scholars spoke, and students and faculty members presented their research. Given the distance between consortium schools, the group has begun to livestream conversations and speakers. By streaming speakers all students at all of the colleges will be able to benefit from hearing guest scholars.

Community outreach is also an important part of the consortium's work. Students at several colleges are working with local, national, and even international groups. There have been workshops aimed at high school students and teachers, with hopes for developing curricula for high school classrooms.

At Bennington, GANAS has students working with local migrant communities in Bennington County. What started as a student-run tutorial has become a formal class taught by faculty member **Jonathan Pitcher**. And

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—Bennington faculty member John Hultgren

naturally, at Bennington, students have also spent their Field Work Term working with organizations tackling the challenges of forced migration. Bennington's signature project, *Bennington Translates*, led by faculty member **Marguerite Feitlowitz**, now has a broader reach and stage in the CFMDE.

Hultgren emphasized that leveraging the voices of the displaced populations themselves is essential. "We can't study contemporary migrants solely as objects of analysis. We have to find ways to integrate the voices of displaced populations into our classes, and to connect with groups doing on-the-ground work."

For many of the faculty members working to address these issues on the campus, this work is a way of bringing ethics and scholarship together. As this new network of knowledge and understanding continues to unfold on each of the campuses, experts see it as a central and ethical urgency. Vassar's Professor Höhn puts it this way: "As colleges, we need to make an ethical statement and commitment to say that forced migration isn't something we can ignore. If we want our students to be ethical and democratic players in the world and in our country, they need that kind of knowledge." **B**