

SCHOLARS AT RISK

NETWORK

'We leave our guns at the door: The Essential Role of Higher Education'

Remarks by Robert Quinn, Executive Director, Scholars at Risk Network

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Scholars at Risk is a network of institutions and individuals in over 37 countries working to promote academic freedom and to defend the human rights of scholars worldwide. The network consists of higher education institutions, academic associations and related organizations, national or regional [SAR Sections](#), and [SAR Partner Networks](#). Information on joining the network is available online [here](#). Information on activities and opportunities to get involved, ranging from conferences and events to seminars to hosting a scholar can be found at http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/Documents/SAR_Activities_Menu.pdf.

My thanks to everyone at Forum on Education Abroad, to the conference sponsors and host institutions, to Lorna Stern for that kind introduction, and to all of you for allowing me to share with you tonight and for the important work you do to connect students, faculty and institutions across cultures and borders. I am very pleased to be with you because the mission of my organization—Scholars at Risk—is very much the same. We also work to link up people across boundaries; people who believe that higher education can have a positive impact on individuals and societies. I should also thank our host university, NYU; our outstanding board members, staff and university members, now comprising almost 360 institutions in 37 countries; and the courageous scholars whom we do our best to serve. I invite anyone connected to a university, college or association not yet part of our network to join with us. I invite your students to consider our internship and seminar opportunities, and your faculty and staff to join in our research and curriculum projects. My colleague Margaret Coons and I will be at a table in the exhibition room the next few days, and I invite you all to stop by, say hello, and discuss the opportunities to get involved. Finally and forgive me, I invite any billionaires in the room, or anyone who knows a billionaire, or who knows anyone on the way to being a fraction of a billionaire, to speak with them about supporting our work, because our mission is both vitally important and impossibly large, and our resources far too limited and uncertain.

An expanding space for thought

I do not plan to spend much time discussing *what* we do at Scholars at Risk. I will say that our mission, as the name implies, is to protect persecuted scholars, as well as to promote academic freedom and the human rights of higher education communities worldwide. More simply, we protect *the space* in society for everyone to think, ask question and share ideas. By this I mean literally the physical space, especially the bodies of threatened scholars but also classrooms, campuses, books, journals and websites whether they are at risk from censorship, surveillance, occupation or violence. Through the protection of these physical spaces we also aim to promote and expand the conceptual spaces for thought and discourse in society; the spaces within all of us to be open to new ideas, to sharing them with each other, and hopefully to making each others' lives better and richer. The first takeaway I would offer tonight is this idea of *an expanding space* for thinking, learning and sharing knowledge. This is central to understanding what Scholars at Risk is. It is central to what the university is and to why the university comes under attack. And is central to why our work matters, and why the Forum and the work all of you do on you campuses matters so much. I think we can judge our collective progress by asking whether the space for thought is in fact growing or shrinking. Sadly, we know that in many places today, the situation is getting worse. The space is shrinking. I want to talk about this,

what we are doing about it, and how we could use your help, but mostly I want to talk not about *what* we do, but about *why* we do it.

With that bit of set-up, let's make sure we are on the same page. Let me ask you to remember the last conference or lecture you attended. Close your eyes if you like. Imagine being back there. How were you feeling? Did you have any fear that you would be arrested when you tried to leave the building? This happened to political science lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe, who were charged with inciting public violence for showing a video in an on-campus discussion of the Arab Spring. This routinely happens when I am visiting professors around the world. In one-on-one conversations in their offices, they shift in their seats, glance toward the door, and then their voices go down toward a whisper when they start talking about what they can or cannot say safely in a public lecture or even a faculty meeting. One instance I will never forget that shows how deep the impact of this goes: I was visiting a scholar hosted by a US university in our network. He was a sociologist who had been imprisoned when his research displeased his country's dictator. Scholars at Risk campaigned for his release as part of our Scholars-in-Prison project and when he finally was out we helped arrange a position. We met in a coffee shop near the university shortly after his arrival in the country, and at one point in our conversation he went silent. He had had health problems as a result of his imprisonment so I was concerned. I asked him, "Are you OK?" He paused, and said "Yes. *It's that I just realized, this is the first time in I can't remember how long, that I don't think the people at the next table are writing down everything I am saying.*" This simple freedom—sitting in a coffee shop without surveillance or consequences—is something that our program and our host campuses were able to restore to him and many others.

Now remember the last time you were preparing to travel to speak at a conference, perhaps this one. Did you have any fear that if you delivered your paper as it was written you might be arrested for its content? That happened to a legal scholar from Iran arrested at the airport on her return from a conference in Germany. Again, Scholars at Risk campaigned for her release and when she got out we helped arrange a position in our network. This is a routine consideration every two years when we organize our "network congress"—the meeting for our global network of participating universities, colleges and associations. Who among the speakers cannot be photographed for fear of repercussions against them or their family? Who might be arrested or prosecuted on their return home for what they say with us? At our first congress it was the scholars from Yugoslavia, Zimbabwe and China we had to worry about. At our meeting in Amsterdam last year, it was those from Russia, Turkey and Egypt.

Or remember the last time you were about to publish an essay, a research paper or a report on your program's activities. Did you have any fear that a mob would literally try to hunt you down, set fire to your office and demand your death, as happened to an English literature professor from Baghdad, a journalism professor from Pakistan, and a secular feminist author from Bangladesh. Or that armed militants would plot your assassination, as happened to a university rector from Aceh, Indonesia, a sociologist from Colombia, a mathematician from Sri Lanka, and many more. The Colombian and Sri Lankan survived assassination attempts. The rector from Aceh did not.

I hope and assume that none of us have had to face these kinds of fears on our campuses. But imagine if you did, do you think you would hesitate to attend the event, give the talk, or publish the essay? If the answer *might* be yes, then you understand self-censorship, the *shrinking of the space for thought* and sharing ideas that I am talking about. You will also appreciate the tremendous courage and dedication of those we have the privilege to assist; those who know these fears, but still speak.

Leaving our guns at the door

In the last decade alone, thousands of scholars and universities around the world have been similarly targeted, with many hundreds killed or otherwise silenced. Why? Why are scholars and universities targeted? And why should we care (aside from pure humanitarian impulses)? I think the answer to both of these questions—“Why are they attacked?” and “Why should we care?”—is the same. And I think it is the same as the answer to the question “Why should we care about education abroad?” The answer to all three of these questions is rooted in how you view higher education; in what you see as the role of the university; and in what, if anything, makes the university special.

To answer all of these questions let me take you to Amman, Jordan in 2008 (before the Arab Spring) where Scholars at Risk organized a workshop with representatives of universities from throughout the Arab world to discuss academic freedom and what could be done to protect it. The discussion ultimately zeroed on this question, “What makes the university special?”, or as we discussed it, “What is the difference between ‘the university’ and ‘the street’”? In that context, the meaning of ‘the street’ was clear. It meant public sentiment, in an individual and collective sense. In the street everyone can have an opinion and hold on to it for any reason or no reason at all. But what we meant by ‘the university’ was harder. It at least meant a place for teaching young adults some portion of accumulated human knowledge. But it also meant something more. It contained some sense of responsibility for the future, for developing new knowledge, especially “useful” knowledge, in fields like medicine, engineering, and agricultural and physical sciences. Within this was a hint that the university was called on for solutions to pressing problems in health, environment, energy, unemployment and lagging economic development. The university should be a place of innovation and entrepreneurialism, at least in the business and wealth-generating senses (but not necessarily in sensitive areas like politics, sociology or religion).

All of these had truth in them, but none fully captured the essence of what makes the university special, what makes it different from ‘the street.’ Then one participant, a former university president, got to it. “*The difference between the university and the street,*” he said, “*is at the university, we leave our guns at the door.*” Coming from a region trapped in decades of violence, he meant it literally, even if it has not ever been fully true. But he meant more than this. He meant that the university is a place where everyone who enters can have an opinion, as in the street, but in the university we expect to have those opinions questioned and challenged. By entering the space, we acknowledge the limits of our understanding. We open ourselves up to new views, including the views of those representing different communities and traditions. And we expect to be called on to explain the basis of our views, and to have our explanations probed, tested, and even rejected, often publicly. Most important, we relinquish the resort to force to

defend our positions and to get our way. This is my second takeaway: Only the higher education space combines (1) equitable access to the widest range of qualified perspectives; (2) rigorous quality testing of those views; and (3) an absolute prohibition on the resort to force to determine outcomes. These combined are the essential difference of our sector, encapsulated in the concept of “leaving our guns at the door.” On the street, I can challenge your opinion only so far before it becomes an insult and I get a punch in the nose, or worse. By entering the university space, we accept that the rules have changed. In the university quality of information, reason and persuasion win. Disputes are refereed by professionals, according to the accepted methods of each discipline, but the bottom line is the same: the strongest, loudest, richest, best-connected or most powerful don’t always get their way, as they might on the street. At least, they are not supposed to.

“Leaving our guns at the door” is the essence of the modern university as a safe place, free from coercion and intimidation, where quality ideas can be developed and discussed. By demanding that we leave our guns at the door, universities have helped to produce extraordinary leaps in human knowledge. But equally important as these, indeed I would suggest even more important than knowledge-production, universities matter because they model this principle and impart it to society. Let me say that again. Training and modeling of the “guns at the door” principle may be even more important than the knowledge produced in universities. Today more than ever, the university has no monopoly on research and knowledge production. But only the university undertakes these functions with a deep commitment to these core values. Complex and contentious issues can be safely aired in the university space. Young people are encouraged and *trained to risk* participating in discussion of such issues by and with skilled experts, and *with each other*. They then take these skills with them when leaving the university, modeling and sharing them throughout their lives (at least, in the ideal). And when the university leaders, staff, faculty and students embrace engagement with the community, the public is even more directly exposed to this process of evidence and discourse, further spreading the idea of leaving our guns at the door, literally and metaphorically.

Isn’t this exactly what we want from top quality study abroad? By sending and receiving participants from different places and cultures, aren’t we trying to broaden the perspectives and experiences represented on our campuses? Aren’t we hoping to test our own discourse against hidden biases, the kinds that cross-cultural quality-testing can so beautifully help to expose? Aren’t we trying to equip our students with the confidence to reach outside of the familiar and learn to reconcile conflicting views and evidence without resort to force? Aren’t we hoping when they return to our campuses and to whatever community they come from, they will model and share those skills with others, throughout their lives? This is what it is all about, and in this unique role great study abroad programs, great colleges and great universities matter enormously. They offer life-enhancing skills and experiences to the members of their communities. But in a much wider sense they are structural bulwarks against authoritarianism and engines of democratic life, peace-building and social justice, *as well as* of discovery and innovation. They can *and should be* frontline advocates for evidence, reason and persuasion, seeking to maximize the capacity of individuals to think, and opportunities for everyone to make informed, creative contributions to their lives and to society.

At the intersection of power and ideas

When we see the university in this way, when we see its mission as expanding the space for thought, and shaping creative, active members of society, we are only a short step from answering the question “Why?” “Why are they attacked?” And the answer is because universities are places where people go to ask questions. And “leaving our guns at the door” says that the legitimacy of any answers to those questions begins with a mutual agreement not to use force to gain acceptance of one’s views. Turn this around and the principle contains an implicit, direct challenge to the legitimacy of any claim to authority which is rooted in force or intimidation. Universities, scholars and students adhering to the principle stand at the intersection of power and ideas, of coercion and persuasion. To extent they are willing to stand up for this principle of knowledge-over-force, and if necessary to suffer the consequences of doing so—as so many of the scholars we work with have done—they expose the limits of coercive authority. For states and others whose authority rests on controlling information, exposing these limits is extremely threatening. Not surprisingly then, they go to great lengths to prevent people from asking questions or even from *learning* to think and ask questions. Their victims include: Omid Kokabee, a graduate student in physics at the University of Texas currently imprisoned in Iran after visiting his mother over the holiday break; Professor Azmi Sharon, a political scientist in Malaysia is currently charged with sedition for giving an interview to a newspaper; Professor Ilham Tohti, a Uyghur scholar recently sentenced to life imprisonment in China for nonviolent expression; and Dr. Salam Jawad,¹ a Syrian archeologist who had to flee the conflict and is not there to preserve heritage sites thousands of years old. They and many others like them urgently need and deserve our help. This is my third takeaway: All of us have a stake in what happens to them, because all of us have a stake in the clash between coercive power and ideas. All of us benefit as the world embraces the “leaving our guns at the door” principle, and transitions from violence, intimidation and coercion to evidence, reason and persuasion.

This choice was never clearer to me than this past June, when I was back in Amman for a conference of Arab universities. The topic of the conference was student mobility, and the discussions were primarily about the details involved in setting up quality exchange opportunities; like standardizing course credits and synchronizing calendars. Forgive me, but I confess I found much of this detail rather boring. But I found the conference inspiring. Because behind the details, this was a room full of skilled, dedicated people from all around the Arab world, motivated by a shared, positive vision for the region; a vision where young people interact with counterparts in other Arab countries and around the world, and build a brighter future based on knowledge. What made this all the more inspiring is that the conference was going on precisely on the days when Islamic State militants were advancing toward the Iraqi city of Mosul, killing indiscriminately along the way. In my hotel room each morning before the conference sessions I would see the march of this dark vision of the region on CNN. Then I would spend hours in the conference with heroic professionals working for a totally different, positive vision, practically invisible. It may be utopian to think this transition from force to knowledge will ever be *fully* complete. But accelerating movement in this direction is *essential* to humanity’s well-being, and perhaps even to our survival, and the higher education community has a vital role to play, I would say a responsibility.

¹ Name changed to protect the identity of this scholar.

A collective responsibility to act

We must meet this responsibility before it is too late. How? We work together. This is our fourth takeaway: The scope of threats to scholars and universities requires a collective response. Everything we do at Scholars at Risk is with partners, starting with the institutions, associations and networks that have joined in our activities. Within this preference for working together, we then take a three-track approach, what we call protection, prevention and promotion. Protection work is the casework that includes especially arranging positions of temporary professional sanctuary for scholars threatened in their home countries. I am proud that so many institutions around the world have done exactly that. Our network arranges about 80 such positions a year, or around 600 since we started, and we assist another 300 scholars or so each year through other services. Protection work is *reactive* security, described in humanitarian terms. Prevention work is *proactive* security, described in human rights terms. It uses the tools of the human rights movement to raise awareness with the goal of increasing accountability and deterring future attacks. Examples include the SAR Academic Freedom Monitoring Project—in which researchers around the world document attacks on higher education communities—and our efforts to engage with UN and UNESCO Member States on the need to improve protection for higher education.

At Scholars at Risk most of our limited resources go toward these protection and prevention efforts. But our focus on the egregious forms of violence against higher education communities in many parts of the world is not to say that there are no threats closer to home, or that these local threats are any less important. On the contrary, quite apart from physically violent or coercive pressures, universities today are under enormous structural and competitive pressures, including from globalization, commercialization, commodification of knowledge, so-called “disruptive” technologies, and more. There is a risk that these pressures are squeezing out the values at the core of higher education—squeezing out the “leaving our guns at the door” principle—not because of hostility to it or the values it represents, but more likely because of the complexity of applying these values in widely varying and fluid settings, and because all of us are racing to keep up with the pressing day-to-day concerns of promoting quality programs, while keeping an eye on the future strength and sustainability of our institutions. This is entirely understandable, but dangerous. The “leaving our guns at the door” principle is first and foremost about creating the conditions from which *academic* quality can grow. Eroding respect for it risks eroding the quality of our institutions, the programs we run, and the knowledge we produce. As we race to keep up, we must find ways to interrogate emerging structures from the perspective of this critical function universities play in building the future.

Promotion work aims to do this. Promotion work aims to build a culture of respect for quality higher education, which over time can insulate the university against systemic and more subtle forms of pressure. Promotion work takes place in the language of higher education values and includes conferences, trainings, workshops, courses, research projects and publications exploring values like academic freedom and autonomy. In one concrete example, Scholars at Risk and our partners are developing the idea of a ‘*Model Memorandum of Understanding on Academic Values*’, which could be used on a voluntary, bilateral basis whenever two universities are entering into an international partnership. The model goes beyond a mere statement on paper, and includes a transparent process for regular, public disclosures and dialogue about values

challenges and questions. Through such dialogue mutual understanding can develop, which can help to unify the sector against outside interference.

Adversaries *and* allies

Finally, it is important to recognize one other area of threat to universities and the “leaving our guns at the door” principle, one that comes not from external malice or systemic disruption but from within the university itself. If, as I have argued, the unique value of the university space is that it combines three elements—openness to the broadest range of ideas, rigorous quality testing, and relinquishing the resort to force—then members of higher education communities have three corresponding responsibilities: (1) to welcome into the our space and programs qualified persons representing the widest scope of society, (2) to engage respectfully with their views, and (3) to challenge respectfully those views according to the methods and standards of the respective area of inquiry or study. In its fullest articulation, the “leaving our guns the door” principle envisions a never-ending cycle of defending each other’s access to campus, defending each other’s opportunity to express our views and evidence, and simultaneously and relentlessly probing those views for weaknesses in order to expose and persuade others of any errors. Good faith adherence to these responsibilities requires members of the university to be *adversaries* on divergent points of view and knowledge, but *allies* in creating, expanding, defending and policing the space to think and ask questions. This is a very delicate balance, and so perhaps it is not surprising that every year incidents arise on campuses in North America, Europe and around the world where members of higher education communities neglect the latter role of ally, and join in or even initiate calls to exclude speakers, expel or prosecute students, fire scholars or university leaders, or otherwise block from their campuses persons or groups with whom they disagree. But absent actual or threatened violence or coercion by those to be excluded—that is, absent their rejection of the “leaving our guns at the door” principle—such exclusions undermine the completeness and therefore the quality of the discourse within the university space. To the extent they create real or perceived subject matter or viewpoint barriers to access to the university, such actions erode the legitimacy of the university itself. In democratic societies, this can erode popular support for the university and its role, making the university more vulnerable to structural and systemic pressures. In less free or secure societies, this erosion of legitimacy can leave the university and its members more vulnerable to the kinds of physically violent and coercive pressures I mentioned earlier. Therefore a critical part of defending the university against contemporary dangers—violent or otherwise—is the willingness of members of the university community to hold ourselves accountable; to live up the fullest meaning of the principle, including defending even those we disagree with when they have agreed to leave their guns at the door too.

A substantial positive effect

Let me conclude with a fifth and final takeaway: notwithstanding the scope of the dangers and challenges we face today, efforts to reinforce the “leaving our guns at the door” principle can have a substantial positive effect. We can reinforce the security of the university space from outside violence and coercion. This is Scholars at Risk's main role, and we welcome whatever help the Forum and each of your institutions and associations might offer. We can reinforce respect for the “leaving our guns at the door” principle within the sector, between universities

and academic communities. This requires moving beyond general statements of support for academic freedom and autonomy, and developing practical, transparent procedures for implementing values principles in all areas of higher education. This is a place where the Forum and like-minded associations can play a leading role, and we are happy to help. Finally, and perhaps most important, we need to reinforce respect for “leaving our guns at the door” within each of our institutions. We need to combat the erosion of this principle from within the university space: from self-segregation along ideological and other lines; from self-censorship; and from lack of good faith, civil discourse. Nothing less than the legitimacy of the university’s claim to public support is at stake, and especially support for autonomy and academic freedom. These concrete steps will help reinforce the core of the university, what I have been calling “leaving our guns at the door”. This may not be the most recognized or quantifiable function of the modern university, but I believe it is its most essential. Thank you.

Robert Quinn believes in the power of ideas to change the world for the better, but recognizes that new, transformative ideas begin with a safe space to think. Scholars at Risk works to promote everyone’s right to think, question and share ideas, freely and safely. Mr. Quinn is the founding Executive Director of Scholars at Risk. Mr. Quinn also serves on the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory, based in Bologna, Italy; the Scientific Committee of Pax Academica, an online journal on academic freedom in Africa published by CODESRIA from Dakar, Senegal; and as a fellow with the Woodrow Wilson Visiting Fellows Program in Washington, DC. Recent publications include [Intellectual-Human Rights Defenders and Claims for Academic Freedom under Human Rights Law](#), *Int’l H.Rts.L.R.*, Vol.3, Issue 2, pp. 209 – 247 (2014) (with Jesse Levine); [“Should an MOU on values be standard in international higher education partnerships?”](#) European Association for International Education’s (EAIE) Global Conversation blog, April 23, 2014; [Institutional Autonomy and the Protection of Higher Education from Attack: A research study of the Higher Education Working Group of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack](#), December 2013 (editor); [The University and the Nation: An International Dialogue on Safeguarding Higher Education in Tunisia & Beyond](#), November 2013 (co-editor); [“What Iran Must Do to Protect Academic Freedom.”](#) *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 16, 2013; [“Why Help Chen Guangcheng?”](#) *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 2012. Mr. Quinn previously served as Executive Director of the Institute of International Education’s Scholar Rescue Fund; on the Steering Committee of the Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR), based in London, UK; a member of the Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; a member of the Human Rights Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York; and Joseph Crowley Fellow in International Human Rights and adjunct professor of law at Fordham Law School. He holds an A.B. cum laude from Princeton, a J.D. cum laude from Fordham Law School and an honorary doctorate from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2010. Mr. Quinn and Scholars at Risk have received a number of honors including the University of Oslo’s human rights award, the Lisl and Leo Eitinger Prize, for “relentless work to protect the human rights of academics and for having inspired and engaged others to stress the importance of academic freedom,” and Tufts University’s Dr. Jean Mayer Global Citizenship Award for “extraordinary embrace of intellectuals fleeing persecution” and “vigorous defense of the principles of unencumbered inquiry and academic freedom.” **For information on supporting Scholars at Risk’s work, joining the network or inviting Mr. Quinn to speak at your upcoming event, call +1-212-998-2179, email scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu or visit www.scholarsatrisk.org.**