

# University-NGO partnership brings hope to students overcoming war

**Student-led group at Wilfrid Laurier University provides full scholarships to students fleeing violence.**

By GRACE KARRAM STEPHENSON & BRUNO VOMPEAN | JUN 12 2017

In late April, the administration at Wilfrid Laurier University announced it will provide additional support for international students from war-torn countries to come study at the university. The news is a big win for the leadership of [International Students Overcoming War](#) (ISOW), a student-led group at Laurier which provides full scholarships to international students whose lives have been disrupted by violence in their homeland. ISOW has been advocating for more money since January, when the uncertain political situation in the U.S. made Canada the preferred choice for many international students fleeing war.

“It’s a challenging opportunity but it’s also a unique opportunity,” said Parker Beemer, a fourth-year history major and current president of ISOW. “Our NGO partners really don’t know what the climate is going to be over the next couple of years and they are redirecting students from the U.S. to Canada.”



May Mahrat is the recipient of an ISOW scholarship at Wilfrid Laurier University.

ISOW and Laurier partner with educational not-for-profits to connect with potential students. One such organization is [Jusoor](#), a group founded by Syrian expatriates to help Syrian youth continue their studies abroad. Leen Al Zaibak is a senior policy adviser for the Government of Ontario and a founding member of Jusoor. “We had 20 students that went to the U.S. last year,” said Ms. Al Zaibak, “but we are uncertain about where to send our students this fall.”

According to Ms. Al Zaibak, organizations like ISOW are ideal partners for administering scholarships. “This student-led initiative has been a joy. Students can connect to each other, and relate to each other. It’s peer-to-peer. The Syrian students are at Laurier because Laurier students want them there. The students themselves are the ones who raised the levy to bring them over.”

Money for the scholarships comes from three sources. A student levy raises half the funds, and the rest is split roughly equally by Laurier and partnering non-governmental organizations. The total value of each scholarship is approximately \$44,000, covering tuition and living expenses, including money for students to fly home once a year.

With the funding increase from Laurier, ISOW will be able to accept six or seven students this fall – three or four undergrads and three master’s students. The group accepted two students in the fall of 2015 and four in 2016.

“The way it is being explained is that the university will offset the international student tuition fees in order to allow incoming scholars to pay domestic rates,” said Gavin Brockett, Laurier’s associate dean of arts, student affairs and learning, and the main faculty sponsor for ISOW. The exact amount of this offset varies depending on the faculty but equals roughly \$10,000 per year per student.

The inspiration for the creation of ISOW was an active learning course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict taught by Dr. Brockett in 2013. “I had this unusual opportunity to have the students do more than a research paper,” Dr. Brockett explained. “I wanted them to walk in the shoes of the people who live with war.” The students were required to research and analyze global conflicts for their academic learning and then reach out to an NGO as a practical component.

The course assignment grew into a student-run organization that was registered in 2014; Laurier’s student body voted in a referendum to approve an eight-dollar levy per student to fund the group. The executive team is now made up of 19 students in charge of everything from accounting to meeting with members of Parliament. At the end of April, they concluded their winter semester with a trip to Ottawa where they presented on ISOW to various members of the federal government.

“I never thought of myself as someone who would be interested in not-for-profit work,” says Mr. Beemer. “But most weeks I work more than 20 hours for ISOW.” Dr. Brockett, who is a huge advocate for active learning pedagogy, counts the experience and skills students gain through their work with ISOW for credit.

“These student execs make the hard choices about where to allocate money, selecting students and partnering with NGOs,” said Dr. Brockett. “With the new funds, they will manage a budget of half-a-million dollars.”

ISOW's support for their international scholars goes well beyond finances. May Mahrat, born in Syria, is an ISOW scholar currently working on her master's in cultural analysis and social theory at Laurier. Even with her cultural expertise, Ms. Mahrat said she faced many challenges studying in Canada. "When I came here, I found everything more open and I was flying. But I was not ready to fly. The pace of life is much slower in Syria."

Ms. Mahrat said the support of the ISOW executive team has empowered her to succeed. "They are always very aware of the cultural differences and sensitivities. They take care of these issues and they are like friends for us. I have developed a sense of belonging here and I look forward to contributing back to the club and the Canadian community."

Even with Laurier's commitment of funds, the demand for scholarships is overwhelming. ISOW and their partners at Jusoor hope that, in light of the unsettled political situation in the U.S., more Canadian institutions will commit to funding international students from war-torn countries. "There is lots of humanitarian aid," said Ms. Al Zaibak, "but no one is focused on the students whose education has been interrupted. And after six years of war [in Syria], there are kids who have known only war – a lost generation."