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Inaugural Student Humanitarian Summit Brings Campus Together to Explore Global Engagement

Student leaders engage students, faculty, visiting parents and others in creating greater campus engagement on global humanitarian issues



The Student Alliance for Global Engagement panel discussion brought together student leaders representing the myriad groups on campus that are active in social justice issues for a conversation about building greater engagement on campus. Image Credit: Hala and Hiba Wakidi

November 21, 2016 | **Brittany Fulgione '18**

BRISTOL, R.I. – An array of student clubs and organizations, as well as professors, staff, and visiting parents, came together on Sunday, October 23 to consider the role of the campus community in addressing global challenges and to gauge the level of campus knowledge and activism on a range of topics regarding humanitarian issues.

The organizers' goals for the inaugural Student Humanitarian Summit – part of the Quest for Refuge Series, a year-long series of events and programming at RWU that will examine the political and cultural impact of refugees around the world – were to inform and inspire students to start or continue working on ways to address the need for alleviation of suffering worldwide, and map out collaborative plans for the rest of the year to engage more students and the broader campus community in humanitarian causes. Roger for Refugees, along with the Spiegel Center for Global and International Programs, and a working group of students, spent a month planning the event, which was co-sponsored by six other clubs and organizations on campus.

From a panel presentation by student-led groups active in social justice issues on- and off-campus to an engaging conversation with a researcher of post-conflict humanitarian efforts, the event featured a good turnout of invested students who expressed a desire to build greater awareness and engagement on many issues relating to international development and humanitarian affairs.

The student panel featured five student leaders from globally-oriented clubs and organizations with memberships across the academic disciplines, including Roger for Refugees, FIMRC (Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children), the Multicultural Student Union (MSU), Africana Student Coalition, International Relations Organization, and Hillel. The students spoke about activism, their work on campus, and how students could get involved to raise awareness of global issues or become an activist via the many active clubs on campus.

“The summit not only connected different organizations and clubs on campus, but it also opened the possibility for future co-sponsorships and events that will ultimately foster the growth of the RWU community as a community that addresses humanitarian issue,” according to MSU panel presenter, Hiba Wakindi '19. “It was an enriching experience to an extent that I had not expected. The keynote speaker gave tangible information that somehow brought refugees really close to our own lives. I am looking forward to working with other students to make a change here in Rhode Island and perhaps in an even larger scope.”

The keynote speaker was Michael Niconchuk, a researcher, consultant and program designer, who has spent the last five years studying post-conflict communities in complex humanitarian emergency and development contexts in Central America and the Middle East. Niconchuk framed out a global perspective on the immense challenges of the world today, and shared intense and empowering field- experience stories about how young people are working to address these challenges.

Bringing the topic home to RWU students, Niconchuk discussed the legacy of Roger Williams as an individual forcibly displaced from his home who was granted sanctuary among the indigenous peoples here on Mount Hope Bay, and the natural resonance of this legacy with the great need for similar support and sanctuary for forcibly displaced globally today. *[Read the full transcript here: <https://mikeniconchuk.com/2016/10/29/the-waiting-room/>]*

During the lunch-and-learn session, a variety of participants shared work they have done and their projects in progress, such as MSU's awareness-raising around genocide. One of the presenters during this session was Assistant Director of the Intercultural Center Cassidy Hammond, who is spearheading a campus-wide effort to collect winter coats and other clothes for refugees newly arrived in Rhode Island. She added that more about this effort, which partners with Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island, including drop-off locations and collection times will be provided soon by the Intercultural Center.

At this session, Professor of Literacy Education Rachel McCormack talked about her project, [Books for Refugees](#) – which raises funds to purchase and distribute Arabic language children's books to teachers working with children in refugee camps across Europe – and encouraged students to become more involved in something they're passionate about.

“The summit enabled me to see the wealth of leadership talent and the commitment to social justice we have on campus,” said McCormack, whose work with refugees was featured in *The Atlantic* earlier this year. “The School of Education students who attended were inspired by the keynote speaker and the student panel, and they have begun to create projects to raise awareness of the current social justice issues.”

After lunch, participants discussed challenges to engaging the greater campus community and more effective modes of communication for catalyzing engagement around important issues, and then mapped out a plan of how and when to take action to raise awareness of global issues. The summit closed with a general consensus among participants that convening to consider vitally important global challenges, and to share perspectives and efforts underway, helped participants feel empowered to make a difference. In particular, student participants expressed hope of helping the RWU campus become more engaged in addressing the many critical needs that transcend boundaries – both around the world, and in Rhode Island.

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