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Pax Populi: Empowering Afghans through Virtual Tutoring

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COMMUNITY PARTNER SNAPSHOTS

Community partner snapshots describe the mission and vision of a community partner and highlight engagement opportunities for Purdue students with the organization and/or the clients.

Pax Populi: Empowering Afghans through Virtual Tutoring

Lara Chuppe (*College of Science and Honors College*)

Student Author Bio Sketch

Lara Chuppe is a senior majoring in computer science at Purdue University. She has been involved in Pax Populi since February 2021, first as a tutor, then as a coordinator for Purdue students who tutored Afghan refugees through the course HONR 39900: Beyond Afghanistan, and now as a volunteer with other parts of the program.

Student Introduction

I began tutoring through the nonprofit organization Pax Populi while taking HONR 39900: Virtual Abroad Central Asia in the spring of 2021. As a service-learning component of the course, we were paired with students living in Afghanistan to tutor them over Zoom. I had volunteered as an English-language tutor in the past, and I hoped that taking this course would allow me to continue this work.

Despite the Taliban's rise to power in August 2021, I remained in contact with the Afghan students I had begun tutoring that prior spring. Listening to their stories following the events of August made me eager to help when Pax Populi began to develop a new program in



Figure 1. Students attending the Kandahar Institute of Modern Studies, a Pax Populi partner prior to the Taliban takeover.

2022 aimed at helping Afghan refugees arriving in the United States.

This article aims to describe the work that Pax Populi has done both before and after the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.

Community Partner Description

Pax Populi (<http://www.paxpopuli.org/>) is the people-to-people peacebuilding program of the nonprofit organization Applied Ethics, Inc., directed by Dr. Robert McNulty and based in Massachusetts. Pax Populi is the primary program of the organization's broader mission to find ethical solutions to significant social problems (About Applied Ethics, n.d.). It began its work in



Figure 2. A program participant studying at Pax Populi Academy in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Afghanistan in 2009. Originally, tutors were paired with Afghans to meet on video-conferencing platforms for English lessons. Afghan young people who could speak English well had better access to educational and employment opportunities, which they could use to work toward both their personal goals and their dreams for the future of Afghanistan (McNulty, n.d.).

Following the events of August 2021, Pax Populi suspended operations in Afghanistan out of concern for the safety of Afghan participants. Since then, Pax Populi 2.0 was launched to provide Afghans arriving in the United States with one-on-one, online English tutoring. Initially, Pax Populi identified refugees residing at Fort Dix, the final U.S. military base housing Afghan evacuees, to participate in the program (McNulty, 2021).

By the end of 2022, the United States will likely have resettled at least 95,000 Afghans (Henderson, 2021). Research shows that immigrants who can speak English earn up to 24% more than those who cannot (Kutrich, 2018). There are significant challenges as well as potential for growth—since 2010, among the Afghan immigrants who have arrived in the United States, the majority had limited English proficiency. Additionally, 29% of Afghan immigrants live in poverty, and their households have a median income that is about \$20,000 less than the median salary for all immigrant households (Batalova, 2021).

Afghan refugees participating in Pax Populi’s program will benefit in measurable ways. The one-on-one, peer-matching aspect of Pax Populi provides them with tutors who can help them with higher education applications, interview preparations, and résumé revisions.

Activity Opportunities and (Potential) Impact

Since 2015, Dr. Liz Brite of the Purdue Honors College has collaborated with Dr. Robert McNulty to offer students in HONR 39900 courses the chance to participate in these opportunities, with 10 to 20 Purdue students participating each semester the course is offered. These courses are open to all Purdue students with at least a 3.0 GPA. Pax Populi supports service-learning at other universities as well, and students can also register to volunteer independently. Each pair completes about 15 hours of tutoring, with topics ranging from English grammar to college applications. Following the events of August 2021, and with the launch of Pax Populi 2.0, 11 Purdue Honors College students were connected with Afghan refugees this past spring. The infrastructure of Pax Populi 2.0 is being rebuilt collaboratively with the nonprofit partner and Purdue faculty and students, and we are currently developing a study to track the intercultural learning outcomes for our student tutors.

Pax Populi’s mission of “people-to-people peacebuilding” would not be possible without engaged volunteers and participants (McNulty, n.d.). It takes volunteers who



Figure 3. At Fort Dix, Dr. McNulty meets the program coordinator living on the base.

are committed not just to teaching but to forming connections and learning. This is not without its challenges. Many Afghan refugees currently resettling in the United States do not speak enough English to be partnered with tutors who do not speak Dari or Pashto. As there are not many bilingual tutors, there is greater demand than there are tutors. Furthermore, since the U.S. government phased out temporary housing on military bases, it has been more difficult to coordinate with prospective students now that they have dispersed across the country from a central hub. Finally, it takes continuous work to make sure that the partnerships formed empower Afghan students and respect the vulnerability of these participants due to precarious immigration statuses along with other stressors.

Tutoring Afghan refugees through Pax Populi will profoundly impact any student who chooses to participate. They will witness the frustrations of building a life in a new country. They will hear stories of the failures of the U.S. immigration system to protect these people even at their most vulnerable and stories of loved ones left behind. These experiences could motivate tutors to continue this type of work into the future, or to find other ways to advocate for displaced peoples.

Reflective Conclusion

In summary, this article was written to inform readers about Pax Populi's work and to describe the current service-learning opportunities offered. The Afghan refugee community will benefit from this project through improving their English and learning about American culture as they adjust to life in the United States.

Volunteer tutors also benefit from the experience. Having the chance to work with individuals who are so resilient and kind in the face of such pain and upheaval changes a person. Volunteers will leave the experience with greater compassion and an expanded understanding of all the

injustice in the world, not just abroad but also within the country. These skills will serve tutors well no matter their future career path.

Students can best prepare to tutor through Pax Populi by learning more about the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the refugee experience upon arrival in the United States. Once they begin working with this organization, they will be most successful if they approach the work with empathy, flexibility, and an open mind for all that their partners will teach them.

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