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Nicholas Griffin

Mary McFarland

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# Higher Ed at the Margins: Cause for Hope

By Nicholas Griffin and Mary McFarland

**T**he 21st century accounts of forced migration and the tragic tales of lost humanity on the high seas have become a crescendoing circle of crisis. In actual fact, never in history have so many people been forced to flee into harm's way and the unknowns of life on the invisible margins. By all accounts there are approximately 59.5 million refugees and displaced persons. The causes are complex and sometimes incomprehensible, but the results are nowhere in doubt: the desperation that causes people to leave their homes comes at massive cost of health, education, and happiness.

Among refugees, internally displaced people, the inner city or rural poor, or indigenous people without access to higher education, desire for education is the common denominator. It is what inspires people most and propels them furthest and is more about responsibility than privilege. The 2012 Human Development Index shows the places in the world with the lowest education have the highest poverty and highest rates of conflict. Through Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM), on-site partners, and university partners, couldn't the sequence change to high education, low poverty, low conflict?

Educational opportunity grows more scarce at higher levels; at the most distant reaches of the margins, tertiary level education is frequently altogether unavailable. A refugee living in a remote camp in Chad explained that the lack of access to education was the root cause of becoming a refugee as he stated "without education, they caught us unaware." Recently, though, new oppor-

tunities have come into focus, and in a handful of communities from Myanmar to Malawi adult learners access higher education through programs offered by JC:HEM.

While still only a small drop in the ocean, JC:HEM – through its partnerships with the United Nations, with on-the-ground organizations like Jesuit Refugee Service, and with storied universities like Georgetown, Regis, and Gonzaga – has begun to deliver quality higher education to thousands of highly motivated learners at the margins. What started in 2010 on sites in Syria, Kenya, and Malawi has in 2015 expanded to 10 countries, and counting. Three thousand students have already passed through its virtual and physical learning centers, studying everything from dynamic algebra to philosophy to community health. Jesuit Commons's model connects communities on either side of the divide between the education rich and education poor. It leverages the combined great tradition and expertise of Jesuit higher education and the vast network the Society of Jesus has built and connects that to the massive unmet needs for higher ed at the margins.

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*Nicholas Griffin, JC:HEM chief operating officer, lives in Washington, D.C.; he had extensive experience with USAID and other international work prior to joining JC:HEM.*

*Mary McFarland, JC:HEM international director, is a cofounder of JC:HEM and is accountable for the implementation of the vision and mission of this global organization; she also continues as a professor at Gonzaga University.*



JC:HEM assessment visit in Chad. An elder speaking on behalf of the community explained JC:HEM was needed in the camp so the young people could have a future. He said “If we had had education in Darfur, we would not be refugees today - they caught us unaware”;

A frequent question is why educate refugees if they cannot be employed due to the rules of host countries. In response, a bright Somali woman made clear that refugees seek higher education not to find jobs but to fight ignorance. These bright, capable people seek education to take on the responsibility of being women and men for others.

In five short years, and building on the lessons of the pilot years 2010 – 2013, JC:HEM has built a substantial and durable infrastructure through its dual diploma degree and certificate nondegree programs and is honing its experience and understanding of what works and what doesn't. There are few precedents for applying Ignatian pedagogy, with its emphasis on experience, reflection, and action, delivered via blended distance learning model, to learners at the margins, and JC:HEM recognizes the need to be flexible as it grows; “scalability, transferability, and sustainability” is its common refrain.

To date, the quality of students entering the JC:HEM classroom has been as impressive as it is diverse. Students come from across the spectrum of communities at a given learning center site:

- Muslim women from Congo sit in classrooms with Christian men from South Sudan, and
- Buddhists from Thailand interact with Burmese Catholics.



## How does a university or an individual professor get involved with JC:HEM?

JC:HEM welcomes faculty participation from its partners across the network of Jesuit colleges and universities and beyond. Whether in design or delivery of courses, JC:HEM keeps an updated list of its recruitment needs online, plus answers to basic questions about technology, remuneration, class size, and so forth. at <http://jc-hem.org/Assets/Publications/File/2015-09-24-Faculty-FAQ-for-Publication-2.pdf>. Other ways to promote institutional partnerships with JC:HEM also exist via other channels, including advocacy, communications, and other opportunities for service. As a part of the commitment of the Society of Jesus, JC:HEM offers individuals and institutions a range of entree to the margins, where the educational needs are surpassed only by the hunger to learn.

Every year the respective classes make strides toward gender parity. In 2015 half of all Community Service Learning Track seats were filled by women and over a third of incoming diploma students are female. Competition for admission is stiff and the admissions process is rigorous, especially for its liberal studies diploma with its fully accredited degree from Denver's Regis University.

JC:HEM's faculty and instructors are likewise drawn from a vast pool of global talent and include sociologists, philosophers, mathematicians, teacher training experts, newly minted associate professors, and recent refugee arrivals who bring with them academic credentials and additional layers of critical capacity and talent. Graduates of JC:HEM's early diploma cohorts have also begun to cycle back into the community and offer guidance and tutoring to future alumni. As with student intake, JC:HEM seeks a multicultural, gender-balanced faculty in both the design and delivery of its content.

Among the network of Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States and beyond, JC:HEM offers unique opportunities for service to both individuals and to institutions and for bringing to action the direction of General Congregation 35: "These massive movements of people create great suffering among millions. Therefore, this Congregation reaffirms that attending to the needs of migrants, including refugees, internally displaced, and trafficked people continue to be an apostolic preference for the Society" (GC 35; Decree 3; para. 38).

Some institutions provide critical support for faculty recruitment, others respond to needs for technical solutions, while others provide essential accreditation for diploma courses and for awarding Community Service Learning Tracks. Where there is shared mission, there exist possibilities for partnership. These connections are continuously forged and strengthened, especially within the American Jesuit College and University network, and a network of member liaisons has been established to help grow additional dimensions of the relationship.

Recently in October JC:HEM graduates were donning their robes and celebrating commencements in Kenya and Malawi. Even while their prayers go out for enlightened leadership among leading nations, nearly 60 million refugees and internally displaced persons are not waiting. As a small part of the Society of Jesus's response to this urgent appeal, access to higher education is cause for hope. ■

(For further information please consult: on the Somali woman on fighting ignorance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=33&v=B4qSfCiKaVQ>;

on the lessons of JC:HEM's pilot years:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B97FsADrM9MrRWNvWWxBsXY3cU0/view?usp=sharing>;

on the networking of AJCU connections:

[www.jc-hem.org](http://www.jc-hem.org).)



JC:HEM opens access to higher education for women.