



Ideas and opinions influencing student services

Mentoring College-Bound Syrian Students

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We sat in downtown Chicago's Bank of America offices for more than an hour. This was our third try, and we had been pursuing our goal for six hours. All we were trying to do was open a savings account and apply for a credit card. I was beginning to learn what it's like to be a Syrian national in the United States on a student visa. Whenever the bank officer tried to enter the required information to open an account, the screen turned bright red and flashed a warning: "SANCTIONED COUNTRY." Then my Syrian student would have to produce additional documents and undergo another legal review. With patience and perseverance, the American bank accounts were eventually opened. This was just one more hurdle for my young mentee from Syria to overcome. He had already surmounted many previous hurdles, having come from the small Syrian village of Al-Bayadiyah, earned admission to Tufts University on

a full scholarship, and finished his first year in college with straight As. I helped him along his way.

I volunteered with the Syrian Youth Empowerment Initiative (SYE) in 2021 to mentor young high school students who aspired to a college education in the United States. SYE, a private non-profit organization, has become successful in recruiting top college prospects in the Middle East. Each year, SYE identifies the most talented Syrian high school students likely to be admitted and obtain financial support at global colleges and universities. Through a one-on-one volunteer mentoring program, SYE provides these students with the moral support they need to showcase their accomplishments, gain admission to colleges and universities worldwide, and succeed there. I have received SYE assignments to mentor approximately 22 students over the course of my five years of work.

Syrian Students are Children of War

The conflict in Syria that began in 2011 continues, although the situation has evolved. The Syrian rebels led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the government of the dictator Bashar al-Assad in 2024. Sectarian violence and military operations by the new Syrian Army, Türkiye, Israel, the Syrian Democratic Forces (a Kurdish-led militia), Hezbollah, Russia, and U.S. Special Operations Forces are still widespread, and aerial bombing is ongoing on the coast and near the Israeli border. These conflicts directly impact Syrian high school students; they are all children of war and continuing conflict.

Counseling Syrian Students from Afar

SYE assignments come from various locations across Syria and Iraq. My mentees lived in Aleppo, Latakia, Tartus, Idlib, Damascus, Masyaf, and Al-Bayadiyah. Several were Syrian refugees; one was displaced by the war and lived in Mersin, Türkiye. Another was a Syrian attending the United World College-Atlantic in Llantwit Major, United Kingdom. I was also assigned two mentees from Iraq: one from a Yazidi village in the Kurdish region near Sinjar and one from Baghdad. Working with these students, I soon learned that electricity in most towns in Syria worked only two to three hours a day, and the internet was unreliable even when the power was on. Most of my students had no computer or laptop. They had to video chat with me, research schools, and prepare essays and other college application materials on borrowed or rented laptops or phones. Additionally, the Syrian government blocked access to certain college websites, requiring a VPN at times, which was both expensive and complicated to obtain. Despite these hurdles, I found my students motivated, extremely bright, and well-educated. All our communications were in English, and all spoke and wrote English fluently.

The education system in Syria does not teach or promote creative writing, which is required for the personal essay in the U.S. Common Application; therefore, it was a struggle to get started. However, my students were open to learning. One of my students

wrote about overcoming the difficulties of being displaced by war and becoming a stranger in a foreign land; another wrote about making dolls from shredded cardboard and rags during childhood; another chose the topic of competing in the International Scientific Olympiad as a member of the Syrian National Team. My Yazidi mentee wrote about the persecution the Yazidi people have suffered both historically and in 2011. Getting to know a student who wrote his college essay about fleeing across the desert to Mount Sinjar with his family before an invading Islamic army bent on genocide and ethnic cleansing was a revelation. Then, it was time to write supplemental essays, compile activity lists, and translate letters of recommendation from teachers and counselors.

One significant hurdle my students faced was obtaining letters of recommendation. High school teachers and counselors are often reluctant to support their students' efforts to apply to global colleges and universities because they oppose losing their best students to other countries. Others are uncomfortable writing recommendation letters; it is not in their job description, and writing in English is difficult.

Financial Aid and The Common Application

For Syrian students, the most critical factor in choosing a college or university is the availability of financial aid that fully meets their needs. This is because around 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line, surviving on very little income. More than one in four Syrians experienced extreme poverty, a situation worsened by the 2023 earthquake. Therefore, scholarships and financial aid are often the most important aspects of a Syrian student's application, so these students tend to apply to schools that are "needs-blind" in their admissions processes rather than "needs-aware." Most SYE students require a "full-ride scholarship" to attend a college or university in the United States, covering tuition, books, fees, room and board, health insurance, airfare from Syria, and more. One university even pays the federal income taxes due on the money my Syrian mentee receives to attend; without this kind of complete financial support, he would still be

in Syria. My first review of a SYE student's application for financial assistance was eye-opening: the family's annual income was under \$500.

Applying for this type of aid from a college or university can be complicated. Accurately describing parents' occupations, family income, and wealth on a college financial application is challenging because comparable, relatable information is scarce. One major factor is the exceptionally high inflation rate. In April 2023, Syria's annual inflation rate was 238 percent, ranking third highest in the world after Zimbabwe and Venezuela. When a college or university requires the CSS Profile to assess financial need, this high inflation rate often means that the full financial needs of Syrian students are not met. The CSS Profile requires that income and wealth be entered in Syrian pounds, and CSS then converts the entries to dollars. However, the conversion is several years old and does not reflect recent inflation. As a result, financial need is seriously underestimated. The ISFAA is an alternative that allows applicants to enter income and wealth information in U.S. dollars, thereby more accurately reflecting their current financial circumstances.

Also, completing the U.S. Common Application is not as straightforward for a Syrian as one might expect. For example, the first question asks for a name, but when a student's name has been translated from Arabic to English on official documents in several different ways, it is not always clear what to enter. The student's address is also unclear for those living in remote rural areas and nomadic individuals.

Taking the SAT Exam

In 2024-25, several U.S. colleges and universities resumed the pre-pandemic requirement that applicants submit standardized test scores, administered by either the College Board (SAT) or the ACT Education Corporation (ACT). This requirement posed additional challenges for Syrian students because the College Board cannot offer a test site in Syria, and in-person testing is required. To obtain an official SAT score, my students must travel to Lebanon or Jordan to take the test, which involves passports, transportation, accommodations, and navigating sectarian violence and

border restrictions. It also ideally requires a personal computer, which many SYE students do not have.

The Syrian Education System is Not Well Understood

All twelfth-grade Syrian students (more than 240,000) take the nine Bakaloria (using the Syrian spelling for Baccalaureate) final exams simultaneously each year. The exams in the scientific stream cover physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, social studies, religion, English, Russian or French, and Arabic. Nationwide results are published on the same day, causing widespread celebrations or mourning. Students must receive a passing Bakaloria score in every subject to graduate from high school; their scores must reach a certain threshold to be eligible to continue their studies at Syrian Universities. College admissions officers unfamiliar with the Syrian Education system often overlook the importance of Bakaloria exams and how they can serve as an SAT or ACT-equivalent for gauging academic performance.

Since many U.S. colleges have adopted test-optional policies in recent years, there has been an increased reliance on grades in admissions decisions. For Syrian students, however, grades from their local schools are significantly less reflective of a student's academic performance than Bakaloria scores. Understanding Bakaloria scores and their use in Syria is complex; translating them to the American grading system is challenging. There is no clear answer to the question on the Common Application requesting a student's grade point average or class standing.

The high school a student attends is another critical factor in understanding a Syrian student's grades and academic performance. In addition to regular public and private high schools, Syria has schools similar to American "magnet" schools, where students are admitted by examination. These magnet schools are public (Al-Bassel School Network, known as School of the Superiors) and private (National Center for the Distinguished). Noting on a SYE student's application that they attended one of these magnet schools is important, as these students often earn lower grades due to the grading on a curve. However, magnet schools

provide access to a wider range of extracurricular activities, such as the Olympiad and Debate, and offer more research and academic opportunities. Since attendance at these schools is selective, the students are generally more academically inclined and achieve higher Bakaloria scores. Harvard University has regularly admitted SYE students from certain magnet schools in Syria who have high Bakaloria scores.

The Challenges of International Travel

Once admitted to a U.S. college with adequate funding, Syrian students still face the challenge of obtaining a U.S. visa, which is never assured. The process became even more difficult on January 1, 2026, when a Presidential Proclamation expanded U.S. travel and entry restrictions to include Syrian nationals. This measure suspends entry for Syrian citizens, citing concerns about security, vetting, and identity management. The U.S. State Department has issued guidance to embassies acknowledging that such proclamations have historically preserved the discretion to issue case-by-case waivers when entry serves the national interest, poses no security risk, and is consistent with U.S. law.

Syrian students admitted to U.S. colleges and universities squarely meet these criteria. Under INA §101(a)(15)(F) and §214(b), F-1 students are nonimmigrants. They seek entry for a specific, temporary, and SEVIS-monitored purpose: full-time academic study. Admission to a SEVIS-certified institution requires extensive academic and financial vetting, including issuance of a Form I-20 only after verification of funding and eligibility. This process itself adds multiple layers of security screening. As such, categorical exclusion of Syrian F-1 applicants risks undermining the individualized analysis required by statute while adding little marginal security value.

SYE students are a particularly low-risk, high-value group that merits an exception to the new Presidential Proclamation: they are selected through a competitive, multi-year process; supported by sustained mentorship that serves as informal but meaningful character vetting; and admitted on merit to institutions willing to invest significant resources in their ed-

ucation. Enabling their entry advances U.S. interests in teaching, research, and global leadership while remaining entirely consistent with national security obligations. Nevertheless, the current visa situation for SYE students remains highly uncertain, and increased advocacy for admitted Syrian students is likely to be required in the foreseeable future.

Because there is no U.S. Embassy in Syria, applicants must travel to another country for the visa interview. Although the U.S. Embassy in Beirut is the closest, it has been less prompt and flexible when SYE students seek visas there. Several SYE students did so and were notified that their visa applications were neither accepted nor denied but were placed on “administrative processing.” This meant they could not apply for a visa elsewhere and had to wait for the Beirut Embassy to take further action. Some waited more than a year. As a result, their colleges deferred enrollment and then withdrew acceptance. Traveling to the American embassies in Jordan or the UAE is more expensive, as it involves crossing more international borders. Still, the potentially insurmountable hurdle with visa applications at the Beirut Embassy can be avoided.

The visa granted to Syrian students to study in the United States confers non-resident alien status, allowing the student to enter the country and remain while pursuing a higher education degree. It is an “entry visa” only. The stamp shows a termination date soon after initial entry, even though the student is legally in the country for their studies and has separate paperwork confirming F-1 student status. If a Syrian college student wishes to go home to visit family or travel outside the United States for any other reason, the student must reapply for a visa to return to school. For all practical purposes, the uncertainties associated with visa issuance prevent a Syrian student from leaving the country.

What I Want Colleges and Universities to Know

When a Syrian student from the SYE program submits a college application, it demonstrates an extraordinary feat of perseverance and the result of years of struggle in an environment affected by war, violence, fear, and economic hardship. All college and univer-

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sity admissions offices should recognize this effort by guiding reviewers on how to navigate the complexities and fairly evaluate the applicant's academic potential and ability to contribute to campus life. One of the primary indicators that a Syrian applicant is worthy of serious consideration is their participation in the Syrian Youth Empowerment program. Unlike the governments of other Middle Eastern countries, such as Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates, Syria does not have programs to identify and award college scholarships to high-achieving students. SYE, a nonprofit organization, fills that need in Syria and is supported by an extensive network of Syrians, expatriates, their networks, and others who donate or volunteer.

Here are some other things for university staff to know:

- Although the Presidential Proclamation and State Department guidance, effective January 1, 2026, purport to ban entry for all Syrian students seeking F-1 status, there remains significant uncertainty about what waivers and exceptions will be allowed. Thus, reviewing college admissions applications from Syrian students without regard to a student's ability to obtain a visa is the best course of action for U.S. colleges and universities.
- Due to the economic conditions in Syria, most, if not all, Syrian students applying to college need financial aid that covers all expenses for four years; they need a college to offer a "full-ride scholarship." Colleges must also reconsider their financial aid processes and use more accurate tools, such as the ISFAA, to better reflect the financial needs of Syrian students.
- Admissions staff should have access to information about the unique features of the Syrian education system. This includes the rigorous "scientific stream" curriculum and the importance of the Syrian National Bakaloria exams. Specific training should be available to help interpret these academic credentials. Additionally, greater flexibility in U.S. standardized testing requirements could ease the logistical challenges faced by Syrian students who cannot take the SAT or ACT because of a lack of test centers in Syria. Information on how to interpret the Syrian grading system and on its relative lack of importance should also be available.
- Syria has a system of magnet schools where students are selected by examination. It is essential to know which Syrian schools consistently produce the best-educated students. Harvard University has identified these schools and usually admits at least one SYE student from the public magnet school in Aleppo each year.
- Greater flexibility in areas such as teacher and counselor recommendation letters would go a long way in helping Syrian students overcome the hurdles in completing their applications.

Guiding admissions officers and other college administrators in this way would benefit Syrian students and enrich the diversity and global perspective of U.S. campuses.

About the Author

Judith Mintel is a retired attorney and an alumna of the University of Chicago College and Law School. Currently, she is a volunteer mentor for Syrian Youth Empowerment. She was Associate General Counsel to State Farm Insurance Companies and an

adjunct Professor at the University of Chicago Law School, teaching seminars in Complex Corporate Litigation Management, Class Action lawsuits, and Insurance Law and Public Policy.