

**Latitudes: In Lebanon, a university becomes a frontline responder**

1 message

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Wed, Jan 8, 2025 at 11:00 AM

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# Latitudes

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## Higher ed as an engine for community resilience

Haneen Jarrad sometimes struggled to hold back her tears while the young students talked about their fears as violence between Israel and Hezbollah flared around them in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

The primary-school students were part of an art-therapy program organized by Jarrad, a sophomore studying English and psychology at the American University of Beirut. In a part of the world where people sometimes bottle up their emotions, Jarrad said she hopes to give children in conflict areas a chance to tell the stories of their own trauma.

"I saw a need," said Jarrad, who also ran the program at home, in the Palestinian West Bank. "I want to give them a sense of being heard."

This fall, as Israeli airstrikes against the Iranian-backed militant group pounded Lebanon, Jarrad was among more than 150 students from the American-accredited university, known as AUB, working daily as crisis responders, delivering aid, providing emotional support, and conducting needs assessments. (A ceasefire to end the fighting,

which displaced more than 1 million people, was agreed to in late November.)

Many colleges have sought to deepen ties with their communities, to harness the expertise and enthusiasm on campus to [tackle real-world problems and needs](#). AUB sees the university, and students like Jarrad, as “frontliners” in response to crises and societal challenges.

Academic institutions can be engines for community resilience, said Rabih Shibli, director of AUB’s [Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service](#). “How can you be a problem solver in the highly complex, complicated world we’re living in?”

The answer, he said, is that students can be “changemakers.”

The center connects students with volunteer activities, service learning, and community-based internships. Students also work in groups on their own efforts, known as community-support projects, identifying and researching a problem, and then creating and carrying out a solution. Each student receives a \$1,000 grant to undertake their projects, which have included refugee and women’s education, mental-health support for migrants, and environmental reclamation.

The approach got its start nearly 20 years ago, following an earlier conflict that left many buildings in the Lebanese capital damaged or destroyed. Shibli, then a young professor of architecture and design, was teaching a course that examined the rebuilding of European cities after World War II. Couldn’t students take some of the concepts they were learning and apply them to the devastation in Beirut?

What began as an experiment became a regular part of Shibli’s teaching, and then spread to other courses and instructors. In 2008, AUB created the civic-engagement center, which holds workshops, runs collegewide community-engagement efforts, and helps professors craft service-learning curricula. Now, Shibli said, it’s part of the university’s “educational DNA.”

Through the center, Mansour Saliba, who is from a small Lebanese village, helped rehab neighborhoods decimated by a 2020 chemical explosion at a warehouse in Beirut’s port. For his own project, he and his classmates worked to combat gender-based violence in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. They organized a two-day workshop to provide 100 women in the camp with information about legal, medical, and social resources, and gave them hands-on self-defense training.

The only criticism: The participants wanted their daughters to get the same coaching. Saliba said the project, and the emotional thanks he and the other students received, “is going to stay with me my whole life.”

The experience also enriched his education, giving him skills like leadership, problem solving, and teamwork that he might not have otherwise picked up in the classroom. The university is “investing in us not only to be proficient in our own subject matter and fields, but as whole students,” said Saliba, who graduated last year and received a Fulbright scholarship to Arizona State University.

Both Saliba and Jarrad had to do community-engagement work as a condition of scholarships they received, but Shibli hopes it will become a requirement for all AUB students.

And while Lebanon’s near-constant state of crisis is unique, Shibli believes the university’s model — one that is multidisciplinary and rooted in analysis and research — can be used by colleges that do not have to deal with what he calls his home country’s “horrorscape.” He has given presentations at international conferences about AUB’s work, and its approach has been adopted by global networks like the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities and the Open Society University Network.

Colleges, and their students and faculty members, should “step out from the confinement of academia,” he said. “We should ask what is the active, tangible role we can play for the community?”

### Upcoming Workshop



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## Musk vs. MAGA

Could President-elect Donald J. Trump's endorsement of skilled-worker visas as "a great program" signal more support for policies to attract and retain international students and other overseas talent in the new administration?

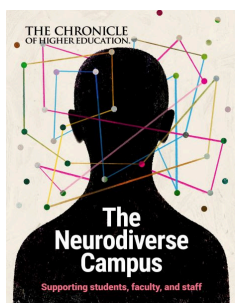
Trump [sided](#) with his billionaire benefactor Elon Musk, who has been feuding with conservatives who want greater restrictions on immigration.

While colleges are among the top sponsors of the visas, known as H-1Bs, some in higher ed hope that Musk, a tech entrepreneur and former foreign student, could [sway](#) Trump on other programs, like optional practical training, or OPT, that serve international students. In 2023, a [record](#) 243,000 students took part in OPT, which allows graduates to work in the United States for up to three years after they earn their degrees.

During the presidential campaign, Trump said he wanted to keep "brilliant" international students in the United States. But during his [first term](#), he also proposed — or threatened — changes that could have put new limits on OPT and other programs for those on student visas.

**Another take:** [Will Trump Take On Misuse of Student Visas?](#)

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Each year tens of thousands of students with diagnoses of neurodivergence graduate from high school. Yet many neurodivergent students remain invisible or undersupported on college campuses. [Order this report](#) to learn how colleges can strengthen their support for neurodivergent students, faculty, and staff.

## U. of Texas divests from China

The University of Texas system will divest its investments from China following pressure by the governor on public colleges and state agencies to limit ties to “foreign adversary” countries.

During a [special meeting](#) last month, the system’s Board of Regents voted to pull out of investments in Chinese stocks and funds and to block any new investments. The University of Texas, which has one of the largest public-college endowments, declined to tell the [Austin American-Statesman](#) how much it had invested in China.

Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, issued a series of [executive orders](#) in November to limit the influence of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party on state colleges and agencies. In addition to prohibiting investment in and contracts with companies owned or controlled by regulatory bodies in risky countries, the executive orders placed restrictions on gifts and travel from or to nations included on a U.S. government foreign-adversary list.

The board’s chair called the governor’s orders “welcome.”

“We agree with him, and that’s why it’s on our agenda,” Kevin Eltife said.

On [social media](#), Christopher R. Marsicano, an associate professor of educational studies and public policy at Davidson College, said Chinese-divestment directives could be difficult for the University of Texas or other colleges to comply with: Most American hedge or index funds have investments in China, and Chinese companies own a number of major American brands. “The devil of divestment is in the details,” said Marsicano, “but there is always a devil!”

## Around the globe

**Members of the American Historical Association voted** to support a [resolution](#) condemning “scholasticide” in Gaza, the latest scholarly group to weigh in on the conflict in the Middle East. The association’s elected council will now consider the measure.

**The FBI arrested** a George Mason University student from Egypt for allegedly plotting an [attack on the Israeli consulate](#) in New York.

**A former University of Kansas professor arrested** as part of the China Initiative is [suing](#) the institution for not rehiring him after he was acquitted of the charges against him.

**The Indian government said** traffickers [exploited the Canadian student-visa system](#) as part of a plan to smuggle people from Canada

into the United States.

**The Australian government will slow [student-visa processing](#)** after an attempt to impose caps failed.

**Leaders of a youth-protest movement** in [Kenya](#) have gone missing in recent months, and many believe the abductions are the work of the government and the police.

## And finally ...

Some college-admission essays focus on tender, but formative, experiences in students' lives. Others detail how they overcame tough circumstances.

But one applicant from Vietnam tried for both tender and tough — how to tenderize tough cuts of meat, that is. The essay [won him admission](#) to Dartmouth College and a sizable scholarship.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at [karin.fischer@chronicle.com](mailto:karin.fischer@chronicle.com). You can also connect with me on [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Bluesky](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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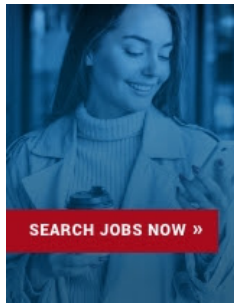


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