

Share Your Stories:

University of Oslo

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK



As a part of our 10th Anniversary, Scholars at Risk is compiling stories from scholars who have been helped and campus leaders, administrators, faculty, students and friends who open their hearts and homes to them. Please share your stories with us! Send us emails, letters, pictures, audio, video or whatever you have about how you or your campus has been involved in protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom.



The University of Oslo (UiO) knows what it means to have academic freedom taken away. In 1943 Nazi forces occupied the university. Teaching and research were severely restricted. Many academics were arrested. That experience inspires their active participation in Scholars at Risk today. "The confrontation between the occupying power and the University during World War II had everything to do with academic freedom and institutional autonomy," says Rector Ole Petter Ottersen. "This history is a large part of what drives us to defend academic freedom wherever we see it being threatened."

Honoring that history, the University of Oslo joined the Scholars at Risk Network in 2001, becoming one of its earliest members and one of only two European members at the time. They have been an active and committed part of the network ever since. They hosted their first scholar in 2004--an Iranian scholar threatened with imprisonment for her work translating international feminist writers and academics into Farsi. UiO welcomed her and allowed her to keep writing. Eventually she went back to Iran. She continues to fight for women's rights today, inside and outside Iran. More recently UiO hosted a political scientist from Latin America who experienced threats related to his investigations of illegal drug trafficking (see sidebar). With the help of UiO and other SAR colleagues, he too is preparing to return home.

Beyond hosting, UiO found many other ways to be involved. They formed a local SAR committee to coordinate activities, invited SAR scholars to visit the campus to give talks, introduced Scholars at Risk to neighboring higher education institutions and helped organize panels about Scholars at Risk and academic freedom at international conferences, including the meetings of the European Association of International Education (EAIE).

Most recently, UiO and several other Norwegian higher education institutions have come together to establish a new Norway Section of Scholars at Risk, which will represent Norway in the wider network and coordinate Scholars at Risk activities in the country. The Norway Section will join national partner networks or sections existing already in the UK, Ireland, The Netherlands and elsewhere, increasing capacity to help more scholars and creating opportunities for influence at a policy level. "Norway is a safe haven for academic freedom and so it's important that we take on that responsibility," says Marit Egner, a SAR representative at UiO who has helped lead the effort. "There is a responsibility to speak the truth and to defend the truth, and this is an important part of the role of universities and academics." The Norway Section will officially launch with a symposium in May 2011 in Oslo. Representatives from higher education institutions in Norway and Scandinavia are invited to attend.

UiO has been a sanctuary for scholars, a forum for understanding, and a partner in building international solidarity. Seventy years ago UiO's academic freedom may have been taken away, but they never lost that spirit. And based on their actions since, they never will.

Drug-trafficking is dangerous. So is researching it.

Drug trafficking is dangerous business. So is being an academic researching it, as one SAR scholar discovered. After publishing articles and giving interviews about his research, he was told to keep silent. People warned him his safety was at risk. Sometimes the warnings seemed sincere; more often they felt like threats. Then a national magazine's office was ransacked after publishing an interview with him. He began to hear noises on his phone, suggesting someone else was listening. He noticed men taking pictures of him on the street with his family. Sensing time was short he fled, wondering if he would ever return.

He turned to Scholars at Risk and the University of Oslo for help. Before long the scholar and his family were safe on campus and he was working again.

After this life-saving reprieve, conditions at home improved. The threats passed, and the scholar is ready to return home, but not without a message for his new friends abroad: "I think that the best way to thank the Scholars at Risk Network, my colleagues at the University of Oslo and the other individuals and institutions that have supported me is to keep on doing the work that they considered worthy to preserve, and to continue contributing to improvements in my country in that way. Thank you always."

Make a gift or learn more at www.scholarsatrisk.org