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SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

EDITORIAL

## In partnership, for partnership: An international conference on humanitarian action

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The articles in the Special Section are the result of an international conference sponsored by International Students Overcoming War (ISOW) at Wilfrid Laurier University and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in March 2023. The 3-day event was devoted to exploring how academic partnerships between students and faculty can best equip students to lead sustainable humanitarian initiatives on university campuses at a time of ever-growing need around the world.

ISOW began in 2013 as a student-faculty partnership when students were offered the opportunity to replace the standard history essay with projects that offered them the chance to apply lessons learned in real-world situations. The result was a student-run and primarily student-funded humanitarian NGO that provides protection to refugees and students at risk as a result of state fragility, violence, and conflict. Over the past decade the ISOW program has expanded and grown in complexity because of successive generations of students committing to partnership through learning.

ISOW embodies the SaP philosophy but incorporates an outward-facing commitment to social action through experiential learning. To those on the outside looking in, the results are impressive, such that many ask how they can implement similar programs at other universities. It will not be easy, but through our commitment to publishing a range of reflections on the student and faculty experience in ISOW, we hope to provide a framework for others to explore how they, too, can build sustainable student-led programs that not only foster effective learning but also support creative ways to make a difference in the world.

### A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ISOW PARTNERS

**Oshish:** As I approach the end of my journey as a student volunteer, intern, and, finally, a full-time staff member for International Students Overcoming War (ISOW), I marvel at how much we have accomplished over the past few years. Gavin, you have seen 6 years of my growth from student to early-career professional; for 4 of those years I have been involved in ISOW. When I

joined the ISOW Scholarship Initiative in 2019, I was excited by the opportunities it presented to gain practical experience in a humanitarian organization as we facilitated resettlement support for students affected by conflict and learned about peace, conflict, and education rights. While we initially understood ISOW as an experiential learning initiative, we now see it through the lens of student-faculty partnerships given the responsibility, trust, and mutual learning that takes place. Over the course of our student-faculty partnership and as I moved into a professional role with you as my supervisor, through collaboration, feedback, and hard work, we have brought so many projects to life. It feels appropriate then that to conclude it all, we worked together to coordinate ISOW's first international conference in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency.

**Gavin:** Over the last 4 years, Oshish, you have played an integral role helping ISOW grow into an organization that remains founded on student leadership through a campus club, but which today is recognized nationally and internationally as a model for sustainable humanitarian action grounded in experiential learning and faculty-student partnerships. What a remarkable journey it has been!

**Oshish:** We dedicated the past year to planning the Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action conference, which culminated in a 3-day event with a rich mix of some 200 international delegates from around the world, including students, staff, faculty, and NGO representatives. Reflecting on the process of planning the conference together challenged us to trace the journey we have been on for the past few years as we built a strong foundation for this achievement. The opportunity to co-edit this Special Section, which will take readers through various aspects of our conference planning and ISOW journey, marks the final stage of our work together. As we thought through how best to share our "debriefing" with readers, we decided to share it in the format that allowed much of our collaboration to flourish: through reflective dialogue that challenged us to articulate answers to deep questions. While some pieces featured in this Special Section come directly from ISOW members, others are the result of sharing the vision with the international audience who attended the conference. The reflections and articles included in this Special Section share insights from working in partnership in various contexts, as well as a Voices from the Field piece featuring conference participants (students, faculty, staff, and NGO representatives from across the world), who were inspired to implement partnership for humanitarian/social action in their institutions.

**Gavin:** Why do you think one of the most prominent international NGOs agreed to partner with a humble team from a mid-sized Canadian university?

**Oshish:** When we decided to convene an international conference with our friends at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), I knew that this would not be similar to conferences we had attended in the past on addressing global issues or other typical research conferences. From my very first interaction with the UNHCR Tertiary Education team as ISOW president in 2020 to the conferences at which I presented in Dubai and Barcelona, I felt heard, understood, included, and respected as a youth with a voice by our friends at the UNHCR.

I think the UNHCR team was willing to undertake this project with us because they had seen the dynamics of our partnership over the years. From those initial Zoom conversations to

meeting us in person in Dubai and Barcelona, I am sure that watching me grow as a student and young professional made them feel that you, Gavin, and I were the right team to pursue this conference. We have spent the past few years working together and exploring new international fora to learn about ways in which we can improve and expand ISOW, all while ensuring our scholarship program is sustainable and growing here at home. Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action as a conference title not only illustrates our synergy with the UNHCR team's values of youth engagement and mobilization, but also the idea at the heart of our work. I think it is precisely because we have demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of student leaders as partners that the UNHCR team wanted to help share this message with more of the world.

It was clear to me that you and I were getting ready to plan a conference that was very different from what we had experienced in Barcelona and Dubai. We knew we needed to capture the energy and creativity that comes with student leadership, as well as communicate the need for partnership in order to embed humanitarian action within an institution. While these conferences included student leaders' voices, we wanted to show how an investment in student-faculty partnerships in particular could be transformational for the institution. At Wilfrid Laurier University, this is a source of practical learning experience that strengthens student learning, in addition to demonstrating Laurier's social responsibility in humanitarian issues. We were so excited to share with others how student inspiration can be nurtured and tied to learning outcomes, so we set out to plan what turned out to be an "unconference."

Gavin, could you share more about your vision for an unconference?

**Gavin:** So often conferences fail to achieve the potential that comes with bringing together a diverse array of delegates. I was determined to continue in the tradition of the previous three ISOW conferences in which active engagement and learning were the priority. At first, an application for a national research grant pushed us in the direction of a standard conference featuring panel presentations of research papers with occasional opportunities for active reflection scattered between. However, you played a crucial role in helping me return to the original vision through your thoughtful questions that made it impossible for me to take the easy route. Instead, through countless conversations, we wrestled with who we hoped would attend and what we hoped to achieve as a result of our efforts.

At the core was our vision for a series of workshops in which all participants—students and staff—would actively engage with each other. On numerous occasions we shared our vision for these with students in an ISOW active learning course taught by a colleague and with the ISOW team leaders who met regularly with us throughout the 3 months before the conference. We spent time presenting our thoughts, testing models, and soliciting feedback. We empowered the students to be frank, and sometimes their feedback was difficult to receive, but I was able to acknowledge its value, and we were then able to fine-tune the final product. The 3 days of the conference revealed that we had succeeded beyond a shadow of doubt: each day the energy was palpable, and the final day (a Saturday) had the most participants, all of whom were extremely complimentary about our efforts. Together we had succeeded at partnering to deliver a remarkable experience for all involved and especially for ourselves! More than that, as this Special Section demonstrates, our approach to the conference also yielded substantial research that satisfies the requirements of the national research grant that we received.

Oshish, as you reflect on this process, what was one of the most significant moments for you as a partner in the planning?

**Oshish:** A memory I cherish as I look back was the series of conversations that you just referred to. I remember a specific instance when we were working on planning the workshops and I disagreed with something you proposed. We were trying to plan workshops that were collaborative and exciting, and I believe we were trying to decide how to set up the table groups. At that moment, I felt comfortable expressing my own ideas, and it struck me that although it was my first time planning a conference of any sort, you recognized that I had important input to offer. You received my feedback well, and we kept working on re-shaping the workshops together. This was truly a highlight of the planning process for me because it reinforced that I have experiences and perspectives that can lead to a stronger shared outcome. I may be a recent graduate, but that in no way diminishes the value of what I have to offer.

We had a lot of similar moments during our months of planning: I remember those times fondly, and while you might joke that I have no problem speaking my mind when I disagree, at the height of conference planning, when we were very stressed, I was afraid that disagreement would be counter-productive. Instead, we have discovered that respectfully challenging each other is part of our dynamic, and knowing when to compromise is something we are also able to do when needed.

This was one of the few times I have worked in a group project where I was not the automatic leader because of my natural tendencies. Instead, I think it may have been the closest I have come to working with an “equal” in the sense that I was heard and valued. I had creative input or control over each aspect of the conference, and while at times it was absolutely exhausting, I definitely do not take for granted the confidence in my abilities that you showed. For someone moving from the student to early-career professional era of their life, this is incredibly validating and an important process that equips me to combat my self-doubts.

Gavin, what do you remember to be the most significant moment?

**Gavin:** I will long remember those intense planning sessions in the Arts Research Lounge where we would resort to extensive diagrams on whiteboards as we set out to solve one problem after another. To be honest, there were moments when the challenges associated with planning the conference were so great that I wondered about giving up, and yet it was my commitment to working with you to achieve our vision that enabled me to persevere. When the conference opened, it was truly gratifying to watch you in action as the fruit of our partnership. Your opening speech was eloquent, you spoke powerfully on your panel, and you capably responded to questions in the final session when we put ourselves on the stage with our UNHCR colleagues. At the same time, I watched you respond gracefully to endless questions and demands from student leaders and delegates over 4 days. For me this was the culmination not only of 10 months of conference planning, but of 6 years of working with you. From the first-year, fresh-out-of-high-school girl eager to explore “who is a refugee” to the confident, capable, and highly respected young professional responsible for leading the conference with me. There you were, speaking knowledgeably about engaging with refugees to develop university-based responses to their challenging circumstances and promoting the very notion of academic partnerships that had been so central to our own growth and learning together. A teacher can’t ask for more than that!

Oshish, as you think about the experience, I wonder how our partnership has affected your approach to both learning and teaching?

**Oshish:** The in-between partnership that I experienced in my role in ISOW this year was an immense privilege while also being very challenging at times. While I played the student role in our student-faculty partnership, I was also filling a staff/supervisor role for the undergraduate leadership team. Throughout the year, I was wary of inadvertently preventing your partnerships with senior ISOW students from flourishing. I was very conscious that it was precisely during my fourth year that I began to take on more responsibility as a result of our student-faculty partnership, and I was unsure that I could fill the role that you typically play with the students.

However, I was always very happy to work with the students who wanted to assume leadership roles at the conference, three of whom were in Directed Studies courses that we co-instructed as well. Playing this dual role with the students allowed me to experience both roles in the partnership process, which made me appreciate the role you played in our partnership better. Not only did this process help me learn, but I saw their confidence grow as a result of working alongside them. I appreciate that our friendships improved our rapport and ability to share feedback that resulted in improved final drafts and conference logistics. I was immensely proud to note their progress!

My favourite part of *partnering down* (a term we used to refer to the role that I played as a “staff” who was responsible for guiding student learning) was that I had the capacity to nurture student leaders to feel equipped to handle real-time responsibilities during the conference. The pressure of a live, public event over 3 days was different from what was the norm in daily ISOW operations: usually there are various levels of support that students can turn to before finalizing a decision, but live events can bring a lot of pressure if the unexpected arises. A virtual training session that we hosted before the conference was a great milestone in our training of the students: you posed hypothetical problems that could arise, and each student leader took turns sharing their responses to such crises. That was the moment I realized that the relationship-building with students, extra time invested in giving feedback, and doing multiple rounds of edits or drafts (where applicable) was worth every second. I think in that moment I felt the pride that you must feel when student leaders take over and demonstrate their capacity for responsibility. When the conference arrived, I was confident my team could respond to anything, and they did. We had to adjust PowerPoints, answer questions, improvise for cancellations, and much more in real time. I was relaxed at the conference not only due to the intricacy of our planning beforehand, but also because I knew that the incredible team of student leaders could handle anything.

In our own student-faculty partnership, I learned how partnership is about repositioning the emphasis of education on the process of learning. I remember all the discussions we had in which I felt like you were mentoring me on how to teach, and, most importantly, how to deal with the unmet goals of teaching. While an instructor may set expectations for a highly engaged class with lots of vibrant discussion, I learned that there are many different types of students and the demonstration of learning is unique to each individual. This requires teaching to be collaborative and about more than outcomes or grades: progress and learning by individual students is very important. As the three Directed Studies students pursued their independent research, I learned that a key part of teaching is having a general roadmap but not a final outcome

for the teaching itself. We had so many interesting conversations about the nuances of various themes in the literature, and I found myself learning from the students. I think this is the most freeing part of partnership with students in that we no longer have to worry about strict definitions of grades and accomplishments. We were privileged to engage with smaller groups so that we could be free to teach and learn and place value on the progress. I am delighted to think back to how the students were speaking eloquently about the complexities in their research topics by the time of the conference and could relate their work to the discussions taking place. They were very enthusiastic about the content coming to life!

What about you, Gavin? You have taught me that learning never ends; more importantly, you have taught me that teachers have as much to learn as students. I wonder what you learned through our commitment to planning the conference together?

**Gavin:** There is no doubt that I have learned a great deal as a result of partnering with you to plan the conference. Perhaps more than anything, the experience affirmed my decision to drastically alter my approach to teaching in a university. Twelve years ago, I started down the path of partnering with students to put their learning at the centre of my efforts, and I have absolutely no regrets: undoubtedly, I am both a better teacher and researcher as a result of this decision. I had organized other typical academic conferences earlier in my career, and yet I look at each ISOW conference—and especially our conference—as far more impactful and significant because not only were students integral to the planning but key participants as well.

As we have engaged in this reflective process, I marvel at all that we both learned over the year, which is why I am so committed to extending the students-as-partners model and embedding it in the ISOW initiative. The conference has affirmed powerfully what I already knew but which I am happy to be reminded of: that the outcomes are so much better if there is a strong, equitable partnership than if I do the work myself. More than that, I think that students bring a particular strength as partners to the process. They have a humility that comes with learning but also a tendency to think outside the box while solving problems. Honestly, I think you are better at imagining positive solutions and taking risks. Overall, the partnership model has taught me so much about myself because a central component is surrendering the power to assume that I am always in the right as the knowledge-holder and professor. Once one does that, it opens one up to learning, but also to questioning oneself and to being challenged by students who may in fact know better and have plenty to teach me. I am convinced that in turn this enables students themselves to be more open to learning as they witness the mutual satisfaction that comes from facing and solving challenges together.

Oshish, I wonder what you would say has been a significant lesson for you as a result of our partnership?

**Oshish:** Throughout the years of our student-faculty partnership, I have greatly valued the opportunities to check in with each other and ourselves, where we gained self-awareness about our strengths and challenges. Without the process of ongoing reflection, we would not have been able to build and maintain the enormous amount of trust and patience that goes into putting together a conference—especially one that is supposed to highlight the benefits of student-faculty partnerships.

I know that this year of planning the conference together has been the most intense of my time in ISOW because I was dealt more responsibility than ever before. At the same time, I am confident that you gave me this much responsibility because you knew I was ready for it: the respect, open communication, and reliability we demonstrated to each other over the past few years made the process of planning such a successful conference together possible. Later in this Special Section, I share more about my work in ISOW over the years and challenges along the way in the broader context of student-faculty partnership work. I cannot say that planning the conference was easy, but I do know that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me that our student-faculty partnership made possible.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Oshish Ungras** is a recent graduate of the Balsillie School of International Affairs with an MA in Global Governance. Her research interests include forced migration, international development, and humanitarian aid.

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