

Launching a Community-Engaged Global Curriculum on Forced Migration Across Liberal Arts Colleges

An Extramural Evaluation of the CFMDE

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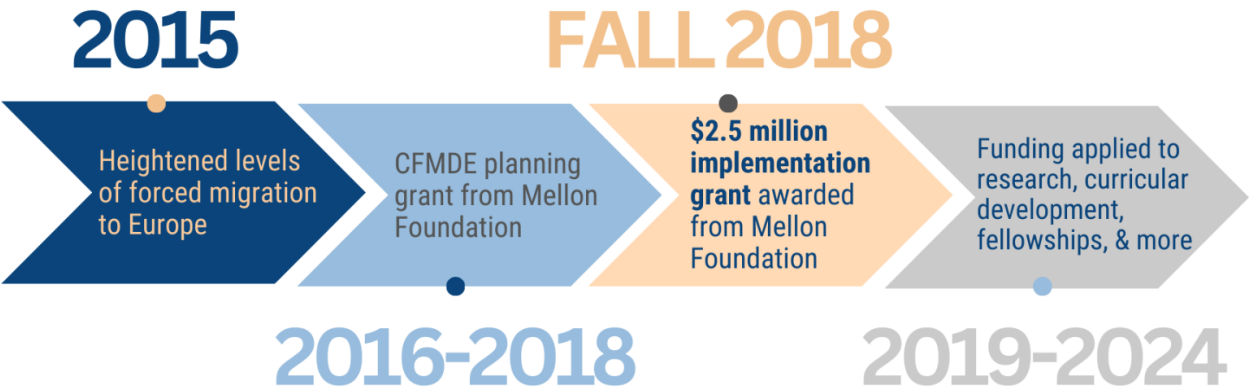


CFMDE

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

⇒ 1.1 ABOUT THE CFMDE & THIS EVALUATION

The **CONSORTIUM ON FORCED MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT AND EDUCATION** emerged out of a student and faculty-led initiative to explore the responses that liberal arts colleges can offer to the global challenge of forced displacement. Since 2016, the CFMDE has worked to establish a rigorous curriculum in migration studies across partner institutions, sponsor collaborative research, and support displaced scholars, students, and regional community members. Consisting of faculty, students, scholars, and community partners affiliated with Bard, Bennington, Sarah Lawrence, and Vassar Colleges and The New School for Social Research, the CFMDE is one of the first multi-campus initiatives in the United States to explicitly train undergraduate students to engage with migration and displacement from multiple disciplinary and pedagogical approaches.



In the grant’s final year, an **EXTRAMURAL EVALUATION PROJECT** was commissioned to reflect deliberately on our collective work and learn from students, faculty, administrators, visiting scholars, and community partners who have engaged with the CFMDE. From these conversations, we identified unique attributes of the grant and resulting network, distilling over six years of programming into substantive considerations of relevance to similar initiatives. This report does not represent every facet of the CFMDE’s work nor the considerable efforts of its founders; a more comprehensive compendium of projects, collaborations, history and key stakeholders can be found on the CFMDE [website](#).

⇒ 1.2 KEY FINDINGS AND LEARNINGS

Over 40 in-depth interviews with faculty, staff, students, and other affiliates identified the CFMDE as an inflection point in their academic, professional and personal journeys, despite

the Trump administration's dismantling of refugee resettlement in 2017 and the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Crucial factors in the impact of the CFMDE included trusting students as leaders, learning directly from individuals affected by displacement, and forging connections across an array of disciplines and fields.

CORE STRUCTURE OF THE CFMDE

WHO

- Students
- Administrators
- Scholars
- Community Partners
- Activists
- Lawyers
- Practitioners

HOW

- Taking an interdisciplinary approach
- Trusting undergraduate students as leaders
- Learning from displaced individuals
- Bringing people together across campuses
- Prioritizing flexibility in the grant's structure

WHO

- Transformative opportunities and new pathways for students
- Changes in affiliates' thinking, research, academic paths, and career goals
- A sustained and wide-ranging network

LESSONS LEARNED

1. The CFMDE showcased a successful fusion of pre-professional opportunities in traditional undergraduate education, underscoring the viability and value of similar programs within liberal arts settings.
2. Working across five institutions with different administrative structures was instrumental, yet it presented logistical hurdles. Institutions were occasionally siloed and lacked consistent communication; implementation would have benefited from grant management expertise and a centralized budgeting system.
3. Future initiatives should prioritize genuine community engagement by: facilitating community-generated projects, improving accessibility of campus spaces and resources for all, celebrating joy, and embracing multiple forms of knowledge.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF CFMDE ACTIVITIES

Over 185 events, including 3 international conferences and 6 cross-campus symposia.

Over 150 students supported for internships, collaborative and independent research, and other enrichment opportunities.

17 in-person and virtual fellowship opportunities supporting displaced scholars.

3 signature study away programs in Germany, Switzerland, and Malaysia.

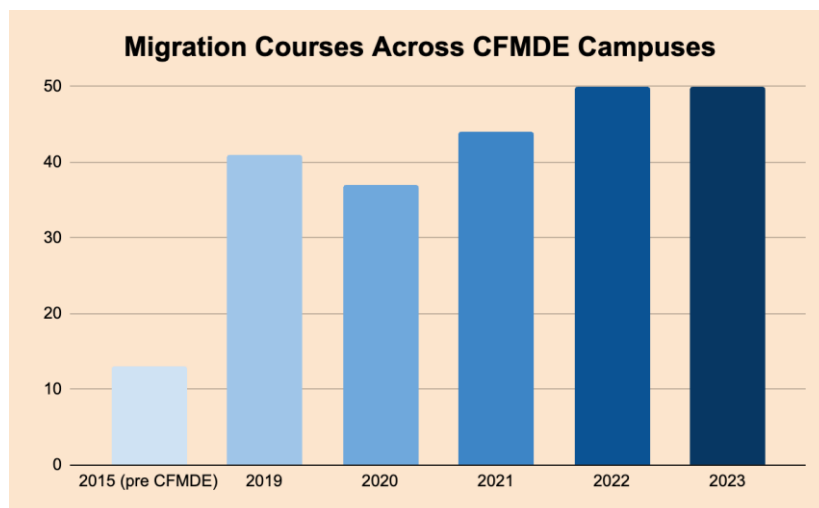
Over 15 regional community partners.

Over 22 international community partners.

95 articles spotlighting global dynamic of forced migration across 5 issues of EuropeNow.

23 essays published in [Migration, Displacement, and Higher Education: Now What?](#) (2023), an open access volume offering an introduction to migration studies.

190 distinct courses on migration taught by more than **100 faculty** in over **35 fields of study.**



3. EVALUATION RESULTS

Interviewees generated an array of themes to describe and reflect upon their experiences with CFMDE projects, coursework, research, study away opportunities, and events. The interviews identified the following core attributes of the CFMDE, three of which are expanded upon below:

- Leads people to change their goals, research and thinking
- Mentorship from faculty and between students
- Provides 'official' support and recognition for migration studies
- Hands on experience and skills building
- Classes changed student trajectories in college
- Learning from displaced individuals
- Trusting students as leaders
- Travel, funding, and internships are more accessible to students
- Not isolated to one discipline
- Grant structure challenges and benefits
- Siloed campuses and different institutional structures
- Bringing people together
- Impactful pedagogical techniques and approaches
- Importance and agility and flexibility
- Bridging theory and practice
- Thinking and acting across boundaries and categories
- Local and global community engagement
- Centering and valuing lived experience

⇒ 3.1 THEMATIC HIGHLIGHT: TRUSTING UNDERGRADUATES AS LEADERS

Students – their ideas, capabilities, and passions – remained at the center of the CFMDE. With the grant's support, students led projects, organized symposia, studied around the world, conducted and published research, and collaborated closely with faculty, guest scholars, and community leaders. 52 received funding for international travel and research, 10 to attend external conferences, and seven to intern with community organizations. This work was hands-on in nature, underscoring the notable levels of responsibility students were given as early as their first year of college.

“IT WAS THE MOST PRE-PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT I GOT AT VASSAR BECAUSE I WAS TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS A STUDENT... THE CFMDE TOUCHED ON A LOT OF ASPECTS OF WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO GET OUT OF COLLEGE.”

–Ava McElhone Yates, Vassar alum and post-bac fellow

The founding vision of the CFMDE that any student could pitch a project, develop, receive funding, and then execute it, was a reality felt by many. For Bennington student Lara Solis, the opportunity to coordinate an original podcast with her professor Özge Savas and nine other students was instrumental in her intended career path in community organizing and research. Reflecting on being in charge of organizing the podcast’s guest speakers, schedule, and technical logistics, Lara noted,

“I’VE NEVER GOTTEN TO DO ANYTHING LIKE THAT EVER. MY PROFESSOR TRUSTED ME AND WAS KEYED INTO THE FACT THAT THIS FIELD IS WHERE I’M GOING TO BE WORKING.”

OTHER EXAMPLES INCLUDED...

- ▶ The CFMDE’s **SUMMER STUDY ABROAD** programs in Bern, Switzerland and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia facilitated active student participation in global mental health policymaking and ethnographic fieldwork, respectively, and brought them to impactful spaces ranging from schools for refugee children to the World Health Organization headquarters. “It was an incredible opportunity, unlike any other, to be able to go to a country with a scholar and work with them on a topic they focus on,” noted Aliya Moudud, a 2023 Malaysia program participant and Sarah Lawrence student. “[Parthiban Muniandy] introduced us to not just researchers and scholars, but also teachers, nonprofit leaders, and journalists.”
- ▶ In CFMDE **AFFILIATED CLASSES**, faculty trusted students as co-creators of their own learning experiences. Across schools, students had flexibility in determining the subjects of their papers, modalities of deliverables, and the language they expressed knowledge in. CFMDE faculty cited student work alongside course texts, encouraged multilingual classrooms, and multimodal forms of knowledge production, actively trusting them as knowledge producers and essential contributors to each other’s development.

⇒ 3.2 THEMATIC HIGHLIGHT: LEARNING FROM DISPLACED SCHOLARS & COMMUNITY MEMBERS

From the outset, the founders of the CFMDE sought to leverage the grant's resources in support of people directly affected by displacement, recognizing that "we can't study migration solely through a traditional classroom experience where you're only thinking about theoretical frameworks. We've got to be connected to migrants and guided by their voices." (John Hultgren, Steering Committee). This intention took various forms across campuses and engaged over 15 regional community partners and 22 international organizations.

► SUPPORT FOR SCHOLARS AT RISK

The CFMDE connected with the [Scholars at Risk Network](#), [IIE](#) and similar organizations to bring displaced scholars and artists to fill positions across its campuses. Funmilola Ayeni, who taught biology at Vassar through this program, cited her experience as a useful introduction to US academia that facilitated access to longer-term positions and ongoing mentorship.

► DIGITAL SCHOLARS FELLOWSHIPS

Scholars who had experienced displacement taught virtual sessions in Vassar courses under the mentorship of Vassar faculty members. These pedagogical partnerships extended to a summer fellowship where student research assistants supported fellows' ongoing projects, such as the [Yemeni Women Archive](#). These collaborations provided valuable institutional support to scholars as well as mentorship and research experience for students.

"THROUGH THIS EXPERIENCE OF HAVING MY VOICE DELIVERED TO THE CLASSES, ACCESS TO LIBRARIES, A RESEARCH ASSISTANT, AND HELP TO TAILOR AN ARTICLE FOR PEER REVIEW... IT GIVES ME HOPE."

–Digital Scholars Fellow

"I GOT REALLY POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM THE STUDENTS EACH TIME WE WERE ABLE TO HAVE SCHOLARS IN THE CLASSROOM. THAT WAS REALLY TANGIBLE... TO SEE GLOBAL FEMINISM IN ACTION."

–Sole Anatrone, Vassar Faculty

► AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

Consortium funding increased the capacity of initiatives that directly engaged with communities surrounding CFMDE campuses. One example is [GANAS](#), a student-run

organization that supports Latino/a migrant workers in Bennington County through legal, educational, and health services, coalition building, and political advocacy. CFMDE funding also supported student interns for the **Dutchess County Asylum Response Initiative**, led by Danielle Riou of Bard College in partnership with [NeighborsLink](#) and [Immigrant ARC](#), which both provide legal support for asylum seekers in the Hudson Valley.

“WE ARE SO HAPPY TO PARTNER WITH THE CONSORTIUM. THEY’VE BEEN A GREAT PIPELINE TOWARDS EXPOSING US TO VOLUNTEERS THAT WE DESPERATELY NEED AND MAY NOT HAVE CONNECTED TO OTHERWISE. IT MAKES A REALLY TANGIBLE IMPACT ON OUR WORK.”

–Daniela Valdovinos, Volunteer Manager at NeighborsLink

“THROUGH “THESE OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE CHANGE AND HAVE AN ACTUAL IMPACT ON PEOPLE’S LIVES ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU AS A STUDENT ON THIS CAMPUS.”

–Bennington Student

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The categories of student, displaced person, community member, and scholar are not static nor mutually exclusive, and throughout CFMDE activities learning flowed between classrooms, institutions, and communities. In the classroom, theoretical discussions were grounded in lived experience through guest speakers, including Digital Scholars. Students also found their engagement off campus to be enriched and contextualized by their coursework.

“THEORY IN CLASS IS REALLY GOOD BECAUSE [I CAN USE IT] WITH THE COMMUNITY. A LOT OF MATERIALS THAT I LEARNED FROM CLASSES HAVE BEEN VERY USEFUL AROUND DISCUSSING AND BREAKING NARRATIVE ABOUT WHY THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY ARE”

–Ignacio Acevedo, Bard student

“I’M NOT ONLY HELPING, BUT I’M LEARNING ABOUT WHAT I’M DOING. BEFORE I DIDN’T REALLY UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT BEHIND [ASYLUM LAW] AND THAT’S WHAT I’VE BEEN LEARNING AND ABSORBING IN CLASS.”

–Greliza Taverez Perez Bard Student

When reflecting on these experiences, interviewees grappled with the positionality of Liberal Arts colleges in migration-impacted spaces, be they a community center in Vermont or school for displaced children in Malaysia. The colonial legacies of these schools as institutions of power undergirded student and faculty engagement with community members and prompted the following considerations from interviewees:

- Physical and psychological **INACCESSIBILITY OF CAMPUSES** to non-affiliates, leading to missed opportunities for reciprocal learning between students and community members.
- Discomfort that CFMDE **FUNDS CENTERED STUDENTS** rather than primarily supporting displaced individuals. Funds had to be spent for educational purposes solely; this was understandable for a higher education grant but often incongruous with where students would have directed money.
- Struggles to contend with and define **NECESSARY MIGRATION RESEARCH**, posing questions such as; who defines a research question and who will actually benefit from it? Does it pathologize a community or advocate for them?

“HUMILITY IS VERY IMPORTANT AS WE ENTER AND EXIT THESE COMMUNITIES. THERE IS SO MUCH PATHOLOGIZING AND FOCUSING ON NEGATIVES; WE DON’T PUT ENOUGH EMPHASIS ON THE THINGS TO BE CELEBRATED.” –Özge Savas, Bennington Faculty

Facilitating critical thought and rethinking assumptions about an institution and its immediate community was something the early actors of the CFMDE hoped the project would facilitate. The considerations—and opportunities for action— identified above should be at the forefront of future work.

⇒ 3.3 THEMATIC HIGHLIGHT: GENERATING INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

At its core, the CFMDE is a network – of students, scholars, community activists, public health researchers, human rights lawyers, and more – convened to think critically, act meaningfully, and equip a rising generation with tangible ways to engage with the world’s most pressing issues. It is through the process of building this community and facilitating new collaborations that the CFMDE had its **MOST NOTABLE IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE INVOLVED**. Events

such as the inaugural Global Displacement and Mental Health conference, student research symposia, and guest lectures generated distinct research collaborations, projects, and partnerships that would not have existed without them.

“ONLY IN THESE KINDS OF ARRANGEMENTS DO YOU HAVE A SUSTAINED CONNECTION TO PEOPLE AT DIFFERENT SCHOOLS THAT YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE OTHERWISE HAD. THAT’S BEEN A REALLY SPECIAL PART OF [THE CFMDE].” *–Danielle Riou, Bard Faculty*

The challenge with anchoring this initiative with individuals is that when/if they leave their institutions, their projects and enthusiasm might go with them. Further, as the grant comes to a close and funding ends, affiliates must contend with if and how projects, courses and relationships with partner organizations are sustained.

However, the CFMDE network and its impact transcend the bounds of any institution or classroom. Tangibly, this is reflected in the multitude of alumni who now work in the migration field or students who find ways to bring migration considerations into their current projects. Bern Program Director Adam Brown estimates that **nearly all previous participants of the CFMDE’s Bern study abroad program are now working in medicine, public health, global mental health, and/or psychology.** Whether students’ positions are directly within the “migration field” or not, CFMDE alumni bring the lens of displacement to a wide range of professional roles, adding a nuanced perspective that deepens the conversation wherever they might be. It is through this impact on individuals’ trajectories that the CFMDE lives on and its network will continue to expand.

“YOU HAVE THIS WHOLE NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO CHANGED WHAT THEY WERE INTERESTED IN. I WAS NOT GOING TO DO ANYTHING IN MIGRATION BEFORE THE CFMDE AND NOW I WORK AT THE IRC.”

–Ava McElhone-Yates, Vassar alum

“IT’S REALLY THE CONSORTIUM THAT INSPIRED ME TO GO IN THIS DIRECTION. IT OPENED THE DOOR INTO THE HEALTH RESEARCH FIELD.”

–Alexa Elias, Bern 2019 participant

“THAT’S THE BEAUTY OF SOMETHING LIKE THIS. YOU PLANT ALL OF THESE SEEDS AND YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM. BUT WE CAN CHART A LITTLE BIT AND SEE WHERE THEY’RE GOING.”

—Kirsten Wesselhoeft, Vassar Faculty

WHERE ARE STUDENTS NOW?

[International Rescue Committee](#)

[Families for Freedom](#)

[NYCLU](#)

[SHARE Research](#)

[UPEACE](#)

[Kids In Need of Defence](#)

[Community Asylum Seekers Project](#)

[University of Virginia Law School](#)

[Watson Foundation Fellowship](#)

[Athens Network of Collaborating Experts](#)

Columbia’s [Mailman School of Public Health](#)

[Trauma and Global Mental Health Lab](#)

And more!

4. CONCLUSION

Since 2016, the CFMDE has grappled with the ways that liberal arts colleges are positioned to engage with migration and displacement, a broad mandate that was aptly explored through a variety of programming types, disciplines and professional fields. Students, faculty and other key players credited their contact with CFMDE activities as catalyzing a change in thinking and a reorientation or clarification of their research, studies and/or career paths; an impact that was facilitated by the high levels of trust afforded to students, partnerships with displaced scholars and community members, and bringing people together across schools and disciplines. The CFMDE’s lasting legacy rests within these individuals whose lives, careers and thinking were touched through truly transformative learning experiences, both on and off campuses; and the commitment of each institution to continue various aspects of programming, whether this be through new courses, programs of study, or community partnerships.

Despite the marked challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions on refugee resettlement by the Trump presidency, the CFMDE’s work was significant for many involved and produced insights that pave the way for similar initiatives. **Specific programmatic highlights that worked well and could be replicated include:**

- Summer **STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS** that bring together students from multiple campuses at no financial cost to them.
- Partnerships with organizations like Scholars at Risk to **CREATE VIRTUAL OPPORTUNITIES** for individuals who aren't able to come to the United States but who nonetheless are in need of support and offer a valuable perspective to classroom spaces.
- **UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SYMPOSIA** that explicitly engage students from a range of disciplines and facilitate investment in and respect for their academic growth and endeavors.

Best practices in terms of the form and structure of programming are:

- Approach programming from an **INTERDISCIPLINARY AND ADAPTABLE** stance to accommodate for dynamic political and social contexts, evolving questions, and changing people.
- Invest in **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS** between individuals and lean into their strengths, interests, and visions. Operationalize this goal by communicating funding opportunities to affiliates (especially students) and encouraging them to initiate and design projects.
- Foster meaningful connections between **THEORY AND PRACTICE** through reciprocal dialogue with students and non-students, accessible campus spaces and resources, and sustained investment in community-led projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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