

# The Refugee Portal Project

at Boston College Nov. 13-16, 2017

[at Harvard Divinity School Nov. 4-10; at the American Academy of Religion Nov. 17-21]

The world is currently facing the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II, with 65 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, including 23 million refugees. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the world's largest group of refugees are the five million Syrians who have been forced out of their country since the civil war began in 2011; the two largest groups of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are in Syria (6.6 million) and Iraq (3.2 million).

At their best, wealthy Western countries struggle to generate the political will to accept substantial numbers of refugees from developing countries, in part because of a natural difficulty in visualizing and responding to distant or alien need. At their worst, they refuse to accept more than token numbers of refugees beyond what is required by international law, or they politicize refugees as threats to national security, cultural identity, or national economy. Although education about relevant facts and figures is important, there is no substitute for a personal encounter to humanize a distant other, and thus reframe our understanding of a global crisis. That is why we are collaborating with colleagues at Harvard Divinity School and the American Academy of Religion (with funding from the Luce Foundation) to create this opportunity for three weeks across the Boston area.

## The Refugee Portal

Nov. 13-16, 8am-12pm, by appointment only

This is the centerpiece of our project: a shipping container made into a studio of sorts, with a wall-sized videoconferencing screen on the inside that connects to other "portals" worldwide to create uncommon conversational/educational opportunities. For four hours each morning from Nov 13-16 we will host a series of 25-minute conversations between small groups of 3-6 BC people and small groups of refugees/IDPs in several locations (the Harsham camp near Erbil, Iraq, and a Syrian refugee community in Berlin are our primary aims, but we have backup options in Amman and Gaza if technical difficulties require it). Conversations will center on music, sports, family, and culture, as well as the particular migration experiences of people on both ends of the portal. See [www.sharedstudios.com](http://www.sharedstudios.com) for more info.



## Educational Efforts

O'Neil Library main lobby, Nov 13-16; Online: ongoing

We are also producing educational materials that will be required reading/viewing for all people who enter the portal from our end. Print and electronic materials will be displayed on exhibit in the O'Neill Library main lobby during the week of the refugee project. A larger collection of videos, maps, infographics, and other information will be bundled as an online EdX course for use this week and beyond.

## Public Event: "Responding to the Global Refugee Crisis at BC and Beyond"

Monday Nov. 13, 6-8pm, Gasson Commons (Room 112)

This reception and community conversation will bring together a wide range of people who are impacted by the global refugee crisis. Guests will mingle while getting refreshments, then hear a series of short talks from refugees who have resettled in the Boston area, plus BC faculty (Westy Egmont, Kristin Heyer, Erik Owens) and students (TBA). This is one of the featured events of BC's International Education Week. RSVP requested; see details at the Boisi Center web site.

For more info, contact Erik Owens ([erik.owens@bc.edu](mailto:erik.owens@bc.edu)) or visit [bc.edu/boisi](http://bc.edu/boisi)