

The Taliban restricts female education. A CT professor is among those teaching Afghan women anyway.

[Lucy Ferriss](#) began talking with her colleagues last winter about doing something to help the women in Afghanistan.

The [U.S. had left Afghanistan](#) a little over a year prior, and Ferriss wanted to help women there continue their education.

So [Ferriss](#) and some other professors at [Trinity College](#) began looking for ways to volunteer.

“Our initial goal was to find out who else is doing this and then we’ll just join them,” Ferriss said. “We looked and looked and there wasn’t anybody doing what we’re doing.”

So she and her colleagues created a group to fill the void: [Afghan Female Student Outreach](#).

Ferriss knew someone who worked in higher education before fleeing Afghanistan and who, she hoped, could help the group find some students interested in continuing their education.

She and her group of volunteers planned for eight courses last summer and expected roughly 30 women to sign up, she said. She was stunned when 150 women applied.

“We all perceived it as sort of an emergency,” said Ferriss, [a writer-in-residence emerita at Trinity](#). “The suicide rate was skyrocketing in Afghanistan.”

After the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, it banned high school and higher education for women.

For Brishna Amiri, the ban came suddenly while she was on break after her sixth semester at Kabul University.

“During this break, we learned that we couldn’t return to school and a decision was made to prohibit women from attending,” she said via email.

Amiri said one of her professors told her about AFSO and she saw it as a chance to continue her studies.

Ferriss said the students who enrolled in AFSO classes had “big plans,” being the first generation of women to have access to higher education.

They talk to their mothers, they know what it was like for their mothers in the 1990s under the Taliban,” she said. “And they’re saying ‘no, this isn’t on anymore.’”

AFSO is a bridge, offering classes to women who want to continue their education. The professors are all volunteers, though, meaning they usually don’t have time to offer classes worth full college credit.

The program also is not directly backed by university or college, although the AFSO is making connections that can help women get into one.

Ferriss said the AFSO has had a relationship with [New York University’s Abu Dhabi campus](#) and, just this month, entered into partnership with the [Open Society University Network](#).

The network, based out of [Bard College in New York](#), allows people to enroll in online classes through dozens of participating colleges, universities and institutions. The Afghan women just need one of the AFSO professors to back the application. Ferriss noted some of the women are further along in their education than others, especially in English proficiency.

The AFSO professors teach in English, so the group had to rely on an online program to help some of the women learn English and understand the content. Ferriss also said the curriculum in Afghanistan was not as rigorous as the students the professors are used to teaching.

“All of the kids who graduate here write a five paragraph essay and know what that is,” Ferriss said. “They (Afghanis) don’t have the slightest idea what that is.”

Still, Ferriss said the Afghan students are “fierce” and determined to learn. AFSO enrolled 110 of the applicants in the first year and the program has grown to 250 for the upcoming spring.

The students continue to face challenges. Amiri said her family is “highly supportive” of her education, but they are afraid to send her away to college.

Ferriss said other women have to quit school so they can get a job to support their families. Others are married off into conservative families that don’t support their ongoing education.

She said AFSO’s professors don’t have the ability to provide humanitarian aid, but they try to offer educational support when possible.

The organization also offers a cell phone data package, valued at \$100 per student, for those who don’t have reliable internet access.

Professors have also found donors who will help with cost of living expenses in cases when women say their families can no longer afford to live in urban areas where electricity is more reliable.

Ferriss said AFSO has enough volunteers – 52 professors now teach through the program – and fundraising is the group’s biggest need.

Amiri has been studying urban design and planning and wants to help reimagine her home country.

“Specifically, I aim to redesign Kabul city to enhance commuting and to professionally design a Jaji national park, a personal favorite, making it an ideal destination for family vacations, hiking, and camping,” she said.

Amiri said designing national parks is her particular “passion,” adding she also has dreams to design one in Nuristan.

Ferriss said many of the women have dreams of improving Afghanistan in some way but many realize they may have to leave their home country, at least temporarily, to do it.

She isn’t sure, meanwhile, how long the AFSO can continue. Enrollment has grown through word-of-mouth, but she fears a crack down from the Taliban could eventually mean women stop seeking opportunities.

“I don’t know what will happen three to four years for now,” Ferriss said.

To learn more about the AFSO or to donate, go to AFSOUUSA.org.