THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

DOCUMENTS AT RISK

A UC-Davis Professor's Mission: Saving Academic Credentials in Afghanistan

By Taylor Swaak

AUGUST 31, 2021

JIM HUYLEBROEK, THE NEW YORK TIMES, REDUX

In the days before U.S. military forces departed Afghanistan, people gathered outside the airport in Kabul, hoping to leave.

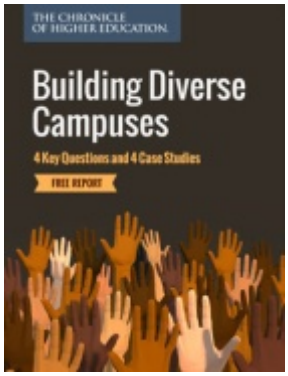
In recent weeks, Keith David Watenpaugh started seeing social-media reports of the Taliban, now in full control of Afghanistan, confiscating and destroying documents at checkpoints. Afghans themselves were burning them, to avoid retribution.

To be sure, the dangers facing those in Afghanistan extend far beyond losing papers. A bombing attack on Thursday outside Kabul's airport killed an estimated 170 people, along with 13 U.S. service members.

But Watenpaugh, a professor of human-rights studies at the University of California at Davis, also knows that for those escaping a war zone, documents like transcripts, diplomas, and certificates will be critical tools for rebuilding their lives and regaining a sense of autonomy. This is especially the case for those pursuing postsecondary

education, where these kinds of materials are required to attend college, graduate, and secure a job.

RECOMMENDED READING



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"People without these materials often do not reconnect with higher education," said Watenpaugh, founding director of the university's program in human-rights studies.

"It is their human right to have unfettered access to evidence of their achievements and accomplishments, and use them as they see fit."

Now, he and his team at the university are racing to raise awareness of a tool they developed that allows those students to store important documents securely: the Article 26 Backpack.

"People without these materials often do not reconnect with higher education."

The tool functions like a safer version of Google Drive. Introduced in 2018 with the help of a $500,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, the Backpack helps vulnerable college-age students and scholars — those in war zones or fleeing persecution, for example — save their educational and professional documents to the cloud, allowing them to access those materials from any device.

About 1,000 people from countries including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Mexico have made accounts since 2018.

While Watenpaugh and his team had previously identified Afghanistan as a place to expand their outreach efforts, the precipitous fall of the country to the Taliban in the past few weeks added urgency. They started an emergency social-media campaign in mid-August on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and enlisted organizations such as the Fulbright and Humphrey fellowship programs to get word to former grantees and scholars.

Watenpaugh estimated that about 200 Afghans have created a Backpack account since then, or about 15 a day. He isn't privy to their personal details, but he said the university's social-media campaign is targeting at least eight different groups, including high-school graduates, undergraduates, graduate students, women's-rights activists, and scholars.

The stakes are especially high for Afghan women, whom the Taliban have historically oppressed and barred from receiving an education, said Aisha Wahab, a city council member in Hayward, Calif. Wahab was the first Afghan American woman elected to public office in the U.S., and is actively encouraging those in Afghanistan to use the Backpack.

"The sad reality is that people cannot live their life as who they are in Afghanistan," she said. And without access to a tool like Backpack, they face "a double edged sword," forced to choose between holding onto documents that could indicate resistance to authoritarian regimes or destroying the documents, upending their education.

With Backpack, Watenpaugh emphasized that users' data is secure and private.

Only a last name and email address are required to create an account, he said, and "administrative practice is not to open someone's Backpack" or ever to share their

data. If a user chooses to share materials with, say, a university through the Backpack tool, the share link will expire after a week.

"The level of security that Backpackers enjoy is identical to that of UC-Davis students," Watenpaugh said.

Keith David Watenpaugh كيث دافيد واطينبا

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Portfolio

My Story, My Future

URL: https://www.youtube.com/embed/ZAPWN_penPM

URL: https://www.youtube.com/embed/dqfp-73ElgM

Current School or Organization

University of California Davis جامعة كاليفورنيا ديفيس

Current Job Title

Professor and Director of Human Rights Studies أستاذ جامعي ومدير دراسات حقوق الإنسان

Certificates and Training

- CITI IRB Training Diploma
- American Sailing Association Training Certificate
- AHA West Book Prize

CV (Curriculum Vitae)

- Current Academic CV

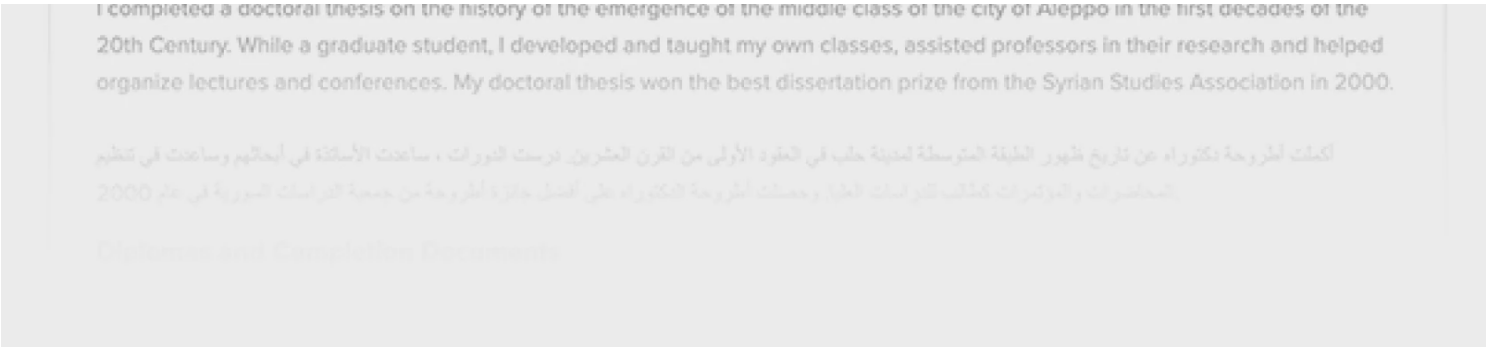
Creative Work(s)

- A Matter of Rights Professor shares his efforts to help refugees access higher education
- We Will Stop Here and Go No Further Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey (2014)
- THE WAR FOLLOWS THEM: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon
- IIE Networker - The Article 26 Backpack
- حقيبة لتمكين الطلاب اللاجئين من استكمال تعليمهم العالي - Al-Fanar Media
- Chronicle of Higher Ed - Syria's Lost Generation 2013

Education

University of California Los Angeles جامعة كاليفورنيا، لوس انجلوس

Level: Post Secondary
Dates Attended: 09/24/1990 - 08/22/1999
Degree/Major: Ph.D (Doctorate) in Modern Middle East History دكتوراه في تاريخ الشرق الأوسط الحديث
Country: United States of America
Graduated: Yes
Description



COURTESY KEITH DAVID WATENPAUGH

Detail of a profile page on Article 26 Backpack.

One thing UC-Davis doesn't do is certify documents' authenticity. However, Watenpaugh noted that his team can help interested Backpack users "get in touch with volunteer credential evaluators."

Backpack is a tool that Eslam Abo Al Hawa, a 25-year-old Syrian refugee who graduated this spring from the American University of Beirut, told *The Chronicle* she wishes she'd had sooner.

Her family fled Syria in 2012 to escape bombings that had left her father and brother injured. They'd abandoned all of their personal documents apart from their local ID cards — documents that Abo Al Hawa said took months of meticulous work to retrieve.

Abo Al Hawa eagerly signed up for Backpack in 2018 when she learned of it from a friend on campus. It now holds some of her most prized possessions: her passport, ID, baccalaureate certificate, volunteering certificates, and references — even a self-made video about her story and aspirations.

It's given her confidence and hope, she said.

"Especially with refugees and underprivileged people, we don't really plan for tomorrow. We just want to live today," she said. Backpack "helped me reflect and

think critically about my past, my present, my future, and my plans. … I dream higher, and I aim higher."

For now, Abo Al Hawa is using her computer-science degree to help develop online-learning courses for her alma mater.

As the team at UC-Davis looks to provide that same confidence now to Afghan students, Watenpaugh acknowledged he's worried about barriers to the internet for prospective users, especially now that U.S. soldiers have left Afghanistan. Though the Taliban pledged to rule peacefully, it has previously banned the internet when in control.

Watenpaugh is considering a few strategies if that happens. The team will try "reaching out to places where Afghans are waiting" for resettlement, like Uganda and India, and collaborating with American universities based in Persian Gulf countries.

"We'll try to get access that way, and say, 'If you have your documents still, put them on the Backpack,'" he said.

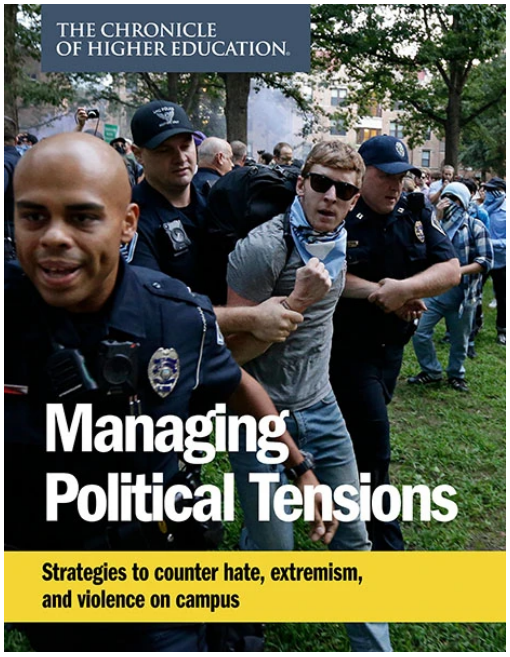
We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

INTERNATIONAL | SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH | TEACHING & LEARNING

Taylor Swaak

Taylor Swaak is a staff reporter at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, covering how innovations in technology are changing the student experience. She aims to hold institutions accountable for technology that is misused or contributes to inequity, as well as uplift success stories that could inspire other ideas.

IN THE CHRONICLE STORE



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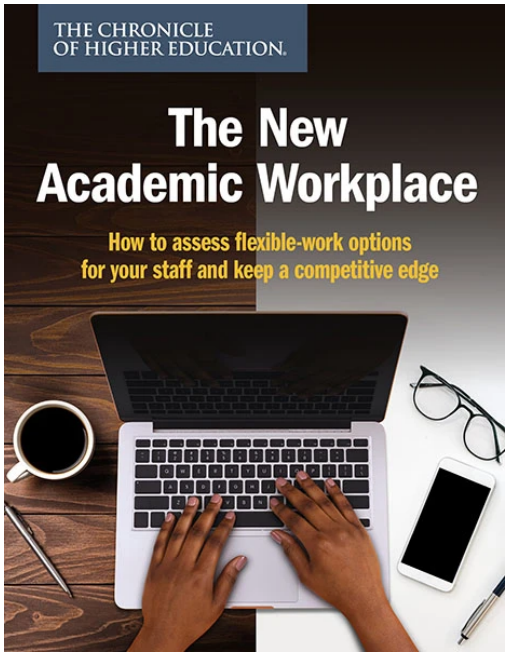
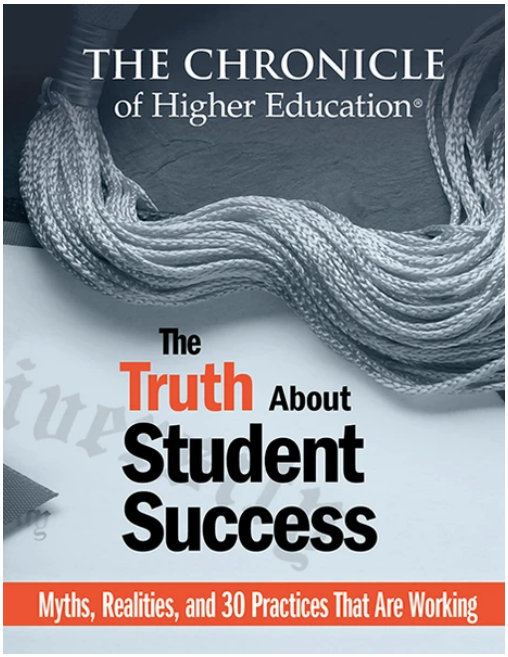
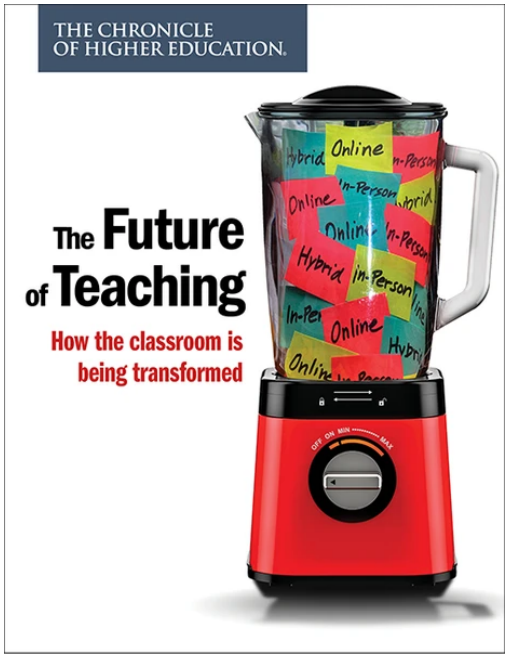


The New Academic Workplace



The Truth About Student Success



The Future of Teaching

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