U.S.-Tunisian University Partnership in Journalism

Independent media and freedom of the press are central to the development of democratic institutions, financial transparency, and social justice. Journalism training is a key component in national development. Instructing people in the skills of investigative journalism and fostering the creation of independent media are crucial for establishing national identity and civil society.

Since the revolutionary events of January 14, 2011, the media are playing an increasingly important role in strengthening the democratic process and pluralism in Tunisia. The country has witnessed the emergence of more than one hundred new publications, a dozen new radio stations, three new satellite channels, and a host of electronic journals. In this burgeoning media landscape, there is a pressing need for investigative journalists trained to work at the highest levels of professional competence.

Recognizing the challenges and opportunities now available in Tunisia, the U.S. Department of State, through the U.S. Embassy-Tunis, is funding a U.S. –Tunisian University Partnership in Journalism. Working with the Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l’Information (IPSI – The Press and Information Science Institute), the U.S. academic partner in this collaboration is charged with helping to design and implement a year-long Master’s degree program in Investigative Journalism at IPSI. The program will teach the basic skills of investigative journalism to entry-level journalists and mid-career professionals, with an emphasis on information sourcing, investigative techniques, and law.

The joint U.S.-Tunisian program will assist in designing a curriculum in investigative journalism, developing course materials, and organizing academic exchanges, faculty training, and mentoring. The educational partnership will include exchanges of faculty and experts, creation of knowledge centers oriented around the practices of investigative reporting, accumulating a library of relevant materials, joint market research into Tunisia’s new media landscape by collaborating faculty, and support for innovative student projects. Finally, the program will identify the individuals, funding sources, and legal and logistical steps required to create a Center for Investigative Reporting.

Tunisia’s only journalism school, the Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l’Information (IPSI – The Press and Information Science Institute) is one of the oldest university
institutions in Tunisia, as well as in Africa and the Arab world. It is also the only state-run institution that trains information and journalism professionals. Operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and with a newly-elected Dean, IPSI is seeking to expand its curriculum with new Master's programs, improve instruction to international levels, and prepare its students to engage more fully with the country’s expanding media sector. This is an historic moment for both IPSI and Tunisia—a fact recognized by both the United States government and the international community, as they seek to foster these initiatives.

The assist IPSI in training the next generation of Tunisia's media professionals, the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY) is proposing to leverage the Economic Support Funds available in the U.S.-Tunisian grant for maximum impact. This will be accomplished through academic exchanges, consultancies, and workshops. Journalism professionals and educators from SUNY will spend substantial amounts of time in Tunisia, with additional consulting by video conference, as they help to develop the curriculum for IPSI's new Master's in Investigative Reporting. An equally extensive effort will be directed toward faculty mentoring, the development of innovative student projects, market research into Tunisia’s new media landscape, and fulfilling the other goals outlined for the U.S.-Tunisian higher educational partnership. The Project also includes a study tour designed to introduce the IPSI Dean and two IPSI professors to educators, public officials, and journalists in Washington, D.C. and New York City.

Working in alliance with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an innovative development organization that fosters investigative centers and investigative reporting around the world, SUNY will use available funds to organize four workshops on investigative reporting, one directed toward mid-career professionals and three directed toward IPSI students and other young professionals working in Tunisia’s expanding media sector. Also with the aid of OCCRP and its affiliated organizations throughout central Europe, Asia, and North Africa and the Middle East, the SUNY team will identify the individuals, funding sources, and legal and logistical steps required to create a Center for Investigative Reporting in Tunisia.

The University at Albany is one of the four flagship campuses of the State University of New York (SUNY), which is the largest and one of the most prestigious research universities in the United States. With 17,000 students, the University at Albany—located in the capital of New York State—welcomes students from 115 countries and maintains foreign exchange programs in 40 of these countries. SUNY has collaborative agreements for development projects in countries around the world, including several in the Middle East and North Africa.

Founded in 1973, the University at Albany Journalism Program is a nationally recognized professional program, with 250 majors working toward degrees in Journalism and another 500 students studying in the Program’s courses each semester. The Program’s staff includes experts in investigative journalism, curricular development, foreign reporting, and the development of international training programs. These
professional educators and journalists have worked throughout Sahelian and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in Algeria, Tunisia, and other MENA countries.

SUNY will be committing three highly-trained professional journalists and educators to the U.S.–Tunisian University Partnership. Professor Thomas Bass, author of six award-winning books in investigative reporting and former correspondent in Africa for Smithsonian magazine, has lived and worked in Sahelian and Sub-Saharan Africa for three years. He has also been involved in establishing university partnerships and other developmental work in Brazil and Vietnam. Professor Nancy Roberts, Director of the University at Albany Journalism Program, is a recognized expert in curricular development and innovative approaches to journalism education. Assistant Professor Rosemary Armao, who has led training workshops and helped to develop investigative reporting centers throughout Central Europe, Asia, and Africa, was part of the team that won this year’s prestigious Daniel Pearl Award for Investigative Reporting.

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, supported by grants from the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The National Endowment for Democracy, the Bloomberg Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations, is a recognized expert in training journalists in investigative reporting. It is particularly adept at negotiating the legal terrain in newly-developing democracies and in focusing on the work required to promote democratic institutions, financial transparency, and social justice. OCCRP will be leading the Project’s four journalism training workshops for entry-level and mid-career journalists and helping to develop Tunisia’s Center for Investigative Reporting.

The Project includes significant cost sharing by SUNY-Albany. The outcome of the two-year University Partnership will be evaluated by a joint SUNY-OCCRP team using models and best practices currently in place for monitoring the expenditure of U.S. Government Economic Support Funds. The ultimate aim is to create, what U.S. Ambassador Gray described, in remarks delivered at IPSI on April 11, 2012, as a “university linkage” that “will lay the foundation for a long and fruitful partnership between IPSI and its American partner institution.”