

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Media contact:

Laura Silber

Open Society Foundations

Phone: +1-917-545-5316 / Email: laura.silber@opensocietyfoundations.org

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George Soros Launches Global Network to Transform Higher Education

Davos, Switzerland – George Soros announced today that he is creating a new university network to better prepare students for current and future global challenges. He is endowing the network with one billion dollars (\$1 billion) and asking other philanthropists to contribute.

The network, which will operate throughout the world, is named the Open Society University Network (OSUN). It will integrate teaching and research across higher education institutions worldwide. It will offer simultaneously taught network courses and joint degree programs and regularly bring students and faculty from different countries together with in-person and online discussions. The network aims to reach the students who need it the most and to promote the values of open society – including free expression and diversity of beliefs.

OSUN will seek to promote rigorous education and reach institutions in need of international partners, as well as neglected populations, such as refugees, incarcerated people, the Roma and other displaced groups. OSUN, with the help of its allies, is ready to start a massive “scholars at risk” program, merging a large number of academically excellent but politically endangered scholars into this new global network.

Already, OSUN is connecting institutions of higher learning and is holding networked courses that unite students and faculty from several universities located in different parts of the world in the classroom, sharing faculty and conducting joint research projects in which people from many universities collaborate.

Mr. Soros said: “I believe our best hope lies in access to an education that reinforces the autonomy of the individual by cultivating critical thinking and emphasizing academic freedom. I consider the Open Society University Network to be the most important and enduring project of my life and I should like to see it implemented while I am still around”.

Mr. Soros, who has given more than \$32 billion over the past 30 years to education and social justice causes, added. “We are looking for farsighted partner institutions who feel a responsibility

for the future of our civilization, people who are inspired by the goals of OSUN and want to participate in its realization.”

The Central European University (CEU), which Soros founded, and Bard College will form the core of the new network. They will partner with Arizona State University, a world leader in distance learning, and other institutions around the globe, such as the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan and BRAC University in Bangladesh.

“We can’t build a global network on our own,” said Mr Soros. “I hope that those who share this vision will join us in making it a reality.

Leon Botstein, president of Bard College who will serve as chancellor of OSUN, said: “OSUN is the most transformative initiative in higher education I have witnessed in my career. It promises robust and diverse partnerships, and innovation extending critical inquiry, research, and scholarship on an international scale. I want to express my gratitude to Mr. Soros and the Open Society Foundations for their vision and confidence.”

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Fact Sheet

Open Society University Network (OSUN)

What is OSUN?

The Open Society University Network (OSUN) is a new model of global higher education. It will integrate learning and knowledge creation across geographic and demographic boundaries, promote civic engagement to advance open societies, and expand access of underserved communities to higher education.

Why is OSUN being created?

OSUN aims to educate students to address tomorrow's global challenges. It will foster critical thinking and open intellectual inquiry to strengthen the foundations of open society amid the current authoritarian resurgence. OSUN will counteract intellectual monocultures and polarization by uniting institutions around the world in collaborative research projects and by encouraging students to examine issues from different perspectives and through reasoned arguments. In addition, OSUN seeks to address inequality by expanding educational access to neglected and minority populations, such as incarcerated persons, the Roma, and refugees.

Who will lead OSUN? And who else will be part of the network?

The Central European University and Bard College are co-founding OSUN, with the support of George Soros and the Open Society Foundations, and will run the network. They will collaborate closely with a wide range of institutions, including universities, such as American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, Arizona State University, Ashesi University in Ghana,, BRAC University in Bangladesh, Fulbright University of Vietnam, Sciences Po in Paris, SOAS and Birkbeck: University of London, and think tanks and research institutions, including the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York, Chatham House in London, the Institute for New Economic Thinking in New York and Oxford, Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna, and the Rift Valley Institute in Kenya. OSUN is actively in discussions with other potential partners that share its principles and academic ambition.

What will OSUN do?

OSUN will integrate curricula, teaching, and research across partner institutions; embed civic engagement into the learning environment and the creation of knowledge to prepare students to become engaged citizens; create new pathways for underserved communities into higher education; and create a dynamic ecosystem of long-term partnerships that will generate innovation and amplify the impact of individual institutions.

Where will OSUN operate?

With a geographically and demographically global network, OSUN will stretch from Bangladesh and Central Asia to the Palestinian territories, from South Africa to Colombia, and from leading universities and research institutes in Europe and the United States to New York State prisons to inner city high schools in Baltimore and Newark to Syrian and Somali refugee camps.

When will OSUN start up?

George Soros announced the launch of OSUN at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January 2020. OSUN programs will begin this year.

What makes OSUN distinct?

OSUN will consist of deep, long-term partnerships based on reciprocity, not vertical integration. Partner institutions will come together in their shared commitment to advance open society and address fundamental global challenges, such as inequality and climate change. They will integrate curricula, courses, and research initiatives across different countries and incorporate civic engagement into higher education. OSUN will thus create a vibrant network of diverse institutions, which will include think tanks, museums, and artistic and cultural centers.

What is OSUN's added value?

The Central European University and Bard College have succeeded in establishing long-term partnerships, integrating courses and curricula across academic institutions, promoting civic engagement, and creating pathways into higher education for underserved communities. OSUN will build on these successes by combining their elements in a single network, strengthening academic integration across partner institutions and achieving a truly global reach.

What impact is OSUN expected to make?

OSUN will endeavor to transform global higher education and make significant impact in communities around the world, including to:

- Build a new model of global higher education
- Cultivate a new generation of globally engaged citizens
- Unite researchers worldwide to address global challenges
- Expand the creation of knowledge for open societies
- Create new pathways for underserved communities into higher education
- Scale up opportunities for refugees to enter or resume university
- Enhance the professional skills of K-12 teachers and university faculty to design and implement student-centered learning

How can philanthropic partners contribute?

Philanthropic partners may support particular programs, enhance OSUN's reach and impact in specific countries or regions, or collaborate with OSUN in building new programs via its unique platform of global higher education. OSUN co-investments can reinforce the commitments philanthropic partners have made elsewhere to advance their aligned missions.

For further information, please contact:

Jonathan Becker
Executive Vice President
Bard College
Phone: +1-845-758-7378
Email: jbecker@bard.edu

Liviu Matei
Provost
Central European University
Phone: +36-1-327-3000
Email: mateil@ceu.edu

Founding Partner: Central European University

The Central European University (CEU) is a graduate institution founded by George Soros in 1991. Its mission is to promote open societies and democracy through advanced research and research-based teaching, primarily in the social sciences and humanities. It originally focused on studying and facilitating the transition to democracy in former communist countries. However, since 1999, CEU has opened its doors to students and academics from all over the world, and has become increasingly a university with a global reach.

- Chartered by the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York, accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and recognized in Austria as a private higher education institution.
- 15 academic departments, a doctoral school, and 20 research centers offering English-language Master's and PhD programs in the social sciences, humanities, law, management, and public policy.
- Ranked among the top 100 universities in the world for social sciences and humanities, and one of the largest recipients of European Union competitive research grants in these fields.
- 1,300 students from more than 100 countries and faculty from over 50 countries. Hungarian nationals constitute the largest share of CEU students, at 15% of the student body.
- Network of 16,795 alumni in 147 countries, which includes current parliamentarians, policymakers, ambassadors, economists, business leaders, academics, and human rights activists.
- A global symbol in the fight for academic freedom. The CEU was declared illegal by the Hungarian government in 2017 and became the first university within the European Union to be stripped of its autonomy and academic freedom, and forced out of an EU member state. It has since relocated to Austria, at the invitation of the Viennese authorities.

CEU has also expanded access of underserved communities to higher education and contributed to significant improvements in teaching and learning across a broad geographic expanse. This work, which comprises financial support and program development, is reflected in:

- 82% of CEU students in the 2017-2018 academic year receiving significant financial aid.
- The creation of preparatory courses and scholarships for Roma master's students, doctoral fellowships, and Romani Studies program at CEU, which have contributed to the education of a critical mass of Roma intelligentsia and leadership in Europe.
- The establishment of a curriculum development database with over 1,000 cases and conducted curriculum development training for a faculty of over 200 universities in Central and Eastern Europe, Central and South East Asia, and the Middle East.
- Outreach efforts in Myanmar, which have included advance planning for university autonomy and quality assurance, the modernization of curriculums for social sciences and humanities, and the promotion of critical thinking in teaching and research.

- The platform development of CEU's Global Teaching Fellows, who have taught courses and introduced new pedagogic approaches at universities with a deficit in advanced teaching capacity in the Balkans, Bangladesh, Brazil, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Palestinian territories, and Russia.

Founding Partner: Bard College

Bard College, founded in 1860, is highly regarded for its excellence in liberal arts and sciences teaching and its innovations in bringing high-quality education to underserved communities. Bard is a leader in forging international partnerships and integrating civic engagement and the arts across its undergraduate and graduate programs.

- 6,500 students are enrolled in Bard's undergraduate, graduate, early college, prison, and micro-college programs and Bard's international affiliates.
- Bard emphasizes academic rigor, critical thinking, open intellectual inquiry, the arts, and civic engagement.
- In addition to its core undergraduate program in liberal arts and sciences, Bard offers advanced degrees which are particularly distinguished in the fine arts, curatorial studies, decorative arts, and music, bringing together students with the world's leading academics and practitioners.
- The faculty are distinguished scholars and leading practitioners in their fields and include 11 MacArthur Fellows. Four recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature have taught at Bard.

Bard extends rigorous liberal arts and sciences education to communities in which it has been underdeveloped, inaccessible, or absent, establishing multiple programs to increase access to higher education. These outreach efforts have included the development of:

- Early colleges at eight public schools in six cities, which offer underserved high-school students a rigorous, two-year, tuition-free college course of study, taught by university-level faculty, that can lead to an associate's degree. Although half of these students are first-generation college goers, 79% of Bard early college graduates have gone on to complete their bachelor's degree, a significantly higher percentage than the 59% national rate.
- The Bard Prison Initiative, which provides a liberal arts education to more than 300 incarcerated people each year leading to associate's and bachelor's degrees. Students released from prison have extraordinarily low recidivism rates: 2.5% for those who have completed degrees and 4% for students who have taken even one class, as compared to national rates of 40% to 50%.
- Bard's micro-colleges, which offer free credit-bearing college courses leading to an associate's degree for underserved adults through libraries and community centers.

The college has a long history of developing and nurturing international education partnerships. These collaborations include:

- Conferring dual B.A. degrees in liberal arts and sciences at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of St. Petersburg State University (Russia), American University of Central Asia (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Al-Quds University (East Jerusalem), and Bard College Berlin.
- Close, long-term partnerships with institutions in Bard's international network, including civic engagement initiatives and network courses that virtually link students and faculty

across multiple campuses simultaneously on themes such as global citizenship, migration, and freedom of expression.

- Awarding Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degrees at the American University of Central Asia and Al-Quds University to extend the benefits of student-centered learning. The nearly 500 Al-Quds MAT graduates teach more than 105,000 students in 120 Palestinian schools on the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Many have become school principals; some contributed substantially to secondary school reforms implemented by the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

Operating on the fundamental belief that education and civil society are inextricably linked, Bard places civic engagement at the core of its mission. Bard was ranked first among US News and World Report's inaugural list of innovative liberal arts colleges, and has distinguished itself through its innovative civic engagement programs that have a local, national, and global impacts. This work includes:

- Bard's Trustee Leader Scholar program, which supports civic engagement projects designed and led by students. Roughly two-thirds of current Trustee Leader Scholar (TLS) projects have run for five years or more, and one-third for 10 years or longer. Several of Bard's most successful institutional initiatives, such as the Bard Prison Initiative, Bard's Early College in New Orleans, and Brothers at Bard, which empowers male collegians of color, began as TLS projects and then were adopted and elevated by the institution.
- Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences courses, which merge theory and practice, allowing students to work within multiple geographies, organizations, and programs in local communities to contextualize their studies and bridge theoretical rigor with experiential action.
- Bard's award-winning Election@Bard program, which supports student voting and engagement in politics.
- Bard's Center for Civic Engagement, which helps coordinate Bard's local, national, and global initiatives to realize its commitment to engaged citizenship, human rights, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, and access to education.

Bard considers the arts a fundamental and essential element of higher education, to the extent that:

- All Bard undergraduates must complete coursework in the fine and performing arts, and the college has established unique programs integrating the arts in academics, international initiatives, and communities.
- The Fisher Center at Bard College, which opened in 2003, brings together students and professionals across disciplines to develop, produce, and present context-rich performing arts programs. Influential opera, dance, and theater productions created at Bard's Fisher Center have been performed worldwide. Similar cross-curricular and multidisciplinary arts programs have been created at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies and Bard Graduate Center.

Initial Funder: Open Society Foundations

The Open Society Foundations (OSF) is an international grant-making network founded by George Soros. It supports civil society groups around the world, with the aim of advancing justice, education, public health and independent media. Since its inception, in 1993, it has contributed:

- \$15.2 billion in total expenditures
- 50,000+ grants to organizations, scholars, and activists in 120+ countries

Although originally focused in the 1990s on Central and Eastern Europe, Eurasia, South Africa, and Myanmar, OSF has since expanded its network to Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, and had a budget of \$1.1 billion in 2019.

OSF's Higher Education Support Program initiated a massive undertaking to reform research and teaching in the social sciences and humanities at universities across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia in the 1990s. It has since expanded this program to over 50 colleges and universities around the world, with the aim of promoting academic freedom, university autonomy, equal and open access to knowledge and education, student-centered learning, service to the community, and transparent, inclusive governance. This program has yielded significant advances, including:

- The creation of beachheads of intellectual freedom and critical enquiry at some of its core grantee institutions, such as the American University of Central Asia and American University in Bulgaria.
- Improvements in the quality of the liberal arts curriculum and pedagogy at the American University of Central Asia, European Humanities University, Al-Quds Bard College, and St. Petersburg University's Faculty of Liberal Arts, in partnership with Bard.
- The introduction of innovative models of access to higher education in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya.
- The establishment of independent external testing system for admissions at Ukrainian universities, which have combat the paying of bribes for student places.

As part of its efforts to expand access to higher education and empowered educators around the world, OSF has provided close to 20,000 scholarships and research grants since the 1980s - with awards in 42 countries, ranging from Haiti to Angola, Eritrea, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Cambodia.

OSF has also demonstrated its deep commitment to academic freedom through its early and long-standing support for scholars who are threatened or imprisoned because of their work. It was a founding contributor to the Scholar Rescue Fund and is a leading supporter of the Scholars at Risk network.

Sample of a successful network: CIVICA

CIVICA, the European University of Social Sciences, is a network formed in 2019 as part of the EU's European Universities initiative. It seeks to unite leading universities in the social sciences.

CIVICA's members - Bocconi University, Central European University, the European University Institute, the Hertie School, the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Romania, Sciences Po Paris, the Stockholm School of Economics and the London School of Economics – aim to form a broad European inter-university campus that links teach and learning, research and innovation, and society at large across cultural, linguistic, and national borders.

On completion, CIVICA will connect 38,000 students from across the world, and comprise a faculty of 7,000 members and some 3,000 administrative staff. It will prototype the European campus of the future, where students, teachers and researchers work in close interaction with private enterprise, regulators and policy makers to find solutions to global challenges, such as climate change and social inequality.

