A consortium that includes Indiana University’s Center for Social Studies and International Education (CSSIE) in the School of Education has received a $38 million grant to restore and improve the educational system in Afghanistan. Over the next five years, IUB faculty will focus on training current and future Afghan teachers about contemporary teaching methods and how to understand and teach English, a key element in the war-torn country’s international reemergence.

This spring, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) awarded the grant to the consortium consisting of the Academy for Educational Development (AED), a Washington, D.C.–based agency that specializes in international educational programming; the University of Massachusetts Amherst; and IU Bloomington, which will receive $4 million from the grant. The consortium will send a team to Afghanistan to work on the project, which involves working closely with the country’s Ministry of Higher Education, USAID, the U.S. embassy, and a variety of nongovernmental organizations involved with other projects in the country. IU’s Mitzi Lewison, a professor in the school’s Department of Language Education, is part of this visiting team and has just returned from an exploratory trip to Afghanistan. Other IU faculty and staff are expected to travel to Afghanistan to work with teachers.

“Culturally, economically, socially, and politically, speaking English is a valuable means for communicating in the global community,” said Terrence Mason, CSSIE director. He said the overall goal of the Afghanistan Higher Education Project is to help reestablish teacher education programs in Afghan colleges and universities to support the growing demand for secondary schools across the country. “With the political events over the last couple of decades, there have been huge difficulties for schools,” Mason said. “Teachers were dismissed; they fled the country. Now, refugees are returning. Part of the effort at stabilizing the country involves restoring the educational system, which requires qualified and competent teachers.” Cultural fluency will be important and challenging as U.S. educators address democratic themes that include enhancing the role of women in the educational system and creating greater equity and participation among the many ethnic and linguistic groups.

Much of the project’s work will involve improving the information technology infrastructure at 16 teacher education programs in the country to provide a way to deliver courses to education majors. IU’s part of the project, however, involves faculty exchanges between the two countries. At least 24 Afghans will travel to Bloomington to pursue master’s degrees in education, with some of them focusing on teaching English as a second language.

For more than 25 years, Mason’s center (until recently known as the Social Studies Development Center) has been developing social studies curriculum and working on a variety of international projects involving social studies and civic education. Its expanded mission allows it to follow the lead of both the School of Education and the university in addressing international issues. Such a move is important, Mason says. “Politically, economically, in many ways we’re linked more closely with other parts of the world. Events that occur in Central Asia or elsewhere in the world have implications for our own security, and our own economic and political development.”

—Tracy James
IU Media Relations