

Welcoming Women From the Middle East

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES from the greater Middle East and North Africa has more than tripled since 2000 to more than 103,000 in 2014–15.¹ The largest number by far come from Saudi Arabia, whose generous King Abdullah scholarship program is now entering its second decade, but there have been significant increases in students from Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, and Yemen as well. More than a quarter of the 90,000 students coming to the United States from Saudi Arabia are women. Although the overall percentage of women is not tracked, U.S. campuses are finding it may take more than a simple foreign student orientation to help them feel comfortable and welcome.

Women from Middle Eastern countries have many different backgrounds. “Their identity is diverse—different countries, rural and urban, personal preferences. Arab, Muslim, Middle East get blanketed as monolithic,” says Lobna Ismail, founder of the training organization Connecting Cultures. Not all women are Muslim or even Arab, and not all Muslim women wear the *hijab*, or head scarf. Nonetheless, says Karen Bauer, regional education adviser for EducationUSA in Dubai, “Americans are very preoccupied with the *hijab*. It is typically assumed that a woman is forced to wear it.” Sandra Tamari, international affairs coordinator at Southern Illinois University, wishes it didn’t always generate conversation. “It’s not relevant. It’s a piece of clothing. If an African comes in a kente cloth, we don’t talk about it.” Ismail is fond of saying, “Don’t focus on what’s on my head. Focus on what’s in my head.”

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Wearing the *hijab* in the United States can cut both ways. “Women who are not covered may be seen as not having good morals within their own community, while Westerners see women who wear *hijab* as repressed,” says Salma Benhaida in the Office of Global Education at Kent State University. Saudi Eshraq Alkhabbaz, recruitment coordinator at Southeast Missouri State University, recalls a small child in a mall looking at Alkhabbaz’s head covering and saying to her mother, “She is from outer space.”

Khawla Bendjemil of Algeria, a Fulbright language teaching assistant at Southern Illinois University, becomes

fearful “when something bad happens in the news. I was really scared when the Paris attacks happened, and I prayed ‘May Allah protect us tomorrow.’” The university held a meeting attended primarily by Muslim students after the attack, giving students a chance to talk. It was during that meeting that Muslim women, joined by the Office of International Affairs, requested prayer space in the student center and more easily identified food options in the dining hall, including labelling foods that contain pork or alcohol.

Integration Should Be Multifaceted

Integrating women from the Middle East on U.S. campuses must be a multipronged effort: predeparture information that includes conversations with students’ families; orientation for foreign students on campus and multicultural awareness training for American faculty, department heads, and service personnel (dining, security, housing); outreach to and beyond the university community; and initiatives by students themselves.

Initial discomfort can be minimized by giving students honest information before they ever leave their home country. Alkhabbaz recalls one Saudi student saying, “I was told I could wear what I wear in Saudi Arabia, but when I did that, everyone was staring at me. They should have told us to wear bright colors, not just black.” Alkhabbaz says women should also be told that people will have a hard time hearing them if they are wearing the niqab, which covers a woman head to toe except for the eyes. “They need accurate information before they leave Saudi Arabia,” advises Alkhabbaz.

EducationUSA sponsors Competitive College Clubs throughout the Middle East to prepare high school stu-



Farah Hallaba, from Egypt, is a sophomore at the University of Maryland.

tion focused on Islamophobia and “how we are wrestling with perceptions and proclamations...and supporting each other in the face of them.” The website 20000dialogues.org offers resources and films to facilitate dialogues about Muslims and Islam.

Syrian Tesbih Habbal accompanied her husband to his medical residency in Huntington, West Virginia, and became the only international student at the local community college. “The school wasn’t prepared for me and I wasn’t prepared for them. No one was rude but they weren’t really friendly either,” she recalls. “They had never seen a girl with an accent and a head scarf.” Determined not to fail, she earned her degree and became a peer coach helping other students.

Now Habbal is enrolled at Southern Illinois University, a campus with 14,000 students, including 135 from Middle Eastern countries, 59 of whom are women. The school has a very active Muslim Student Association and a vibrant Arabic Club, both instrumental in welcoming new students and educating the broader community. Habbal and Khawla Bendjemil revitalized the Arabic club, organizing small events to introduce U.S. students to Middle Eastern culture, including a biweekly Arabic conversation hour. A Muslim Awareness Day was held shortly after the Paris attacks in November 2015, with an “Ask a Muslim” table and a “hijab challenge,” making scarves available so women could experience fashioning and wearing the head scarf. “We got our message across; students want to learn more and we need to provide that opportunity,” said Habbal. Reaching out helps students fit in, enabling women to take an active role in their own acculturation in the United States. “It helps germinate seeds of friendship and engagement across cultures and religions,” adds Lobna Ismail.

Saudi Arabia itself sponsors 330 Saudi student clubs at U.S. universities, both to help new Saudi students transition to the United States and also to serve the local community. Faisal Alshammeri in the Cultural Mission of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia says the average club holds 35 to 40 events a year, including celebrations for Saudi national and religious days but also visits to local senior citizen centers or soup kitchens.

dents for the U.S. college experience. Advisers meet weekly with small cohorts of students. Sarah Alfaiz, a College Club alumna, came to Boston University from Saudi Arabia with the self-confidence to found Arabs for Altruism, a volunteer organization dedicated to helping poor people in the Boston area.

The Importance of Working With Families

Bauer believes contact with families is crucial. “If you have a travel budget, visit these countries to meet with the parents. Have dinner with the prospective applicant.” Skype is an alternative, with current students who speak Arabic serving as translators, if needed.

“Families will ask, ‘Is it safe for my daughter to go to the United States?’” Bauer says this is the chance for U.S. advisers to educate families about campus police, key cards, and other security measures. Advisers should also be prepared to answer family questions about housing and the availability of halal (permitted) food. In Saudi Arabia, notes Alkhabbaz “we are not used to roommates we don’t know. Roommates in Saudi Arabia come from the same town and perhaps know my sister. We don’t move in with a stranger.” At Kent State University, Benhaida makes sure families and

students are aware that there are dormitories just for women as well as all-women floors in coed dorms. If students are required to live on campus but appropriate housing is not available, “we’ll work with housing services to modify the rules,” says Benhaida.

Specific Accommodations for Women From the Middle East

In some ways, making such accommodations is not much different than accommodations made for students with other special circumstances like wheelchairs, service animals, or severe allergies, suggests Vanessa Christman, assistant dean for access and community development at Bryn Mawr College. Bryn Mawr has only 1,300 students but 25 percent are international, including a small number from the Middle East. “We require students to be on a meal plan, but during (the Muslim holy month of) Ramadan, our dining services provide opportunities for students to eat before and after the fast each day,” explains Christman. The college also has halal and kosher kitchens, overseen by students, as well as a prayer room in the student life building. Recently, Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges sponsored a diversity conversa-

“It’s not only about education...we have very good universities in the Kingdom but this is a full package experience. At one point I had 15 women presidents of these clubs,” says Alshammeri. He counsels women students to get involved and speak directly to professors or the international student office if they are having problems. Advisers should be prepared to address problems that are not purely academic. Saudi women typically come with a father, brother, or husband who is granted the same scholarship and often children as well: mothers may need help finding and understanding child care in the United States. Women and couples may need suggestions and opportunities to meet U.S. students casually without going to bars.

Some problems emanate from the structure of U.S. classes. Egyptian sophomore Farah Hallaba at the University of Maryland notes how different the academic culture here is. “It’s a bigger course load and



Tesbih Habbal, a student from Syria, participates in a diversity fair at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

more homework. At home, the final exam is important and sometimes they don’t even care whether you attend the class. At first, I thought ‘how will I do all of that?’” She found it helpful to have thorough orientations about classroom expectations as well as encouragement to speak with individual professors. Hallaba soon began to appreciate the opportunity to show her creativity in classroom projects.

Raising Cultural Awareness Through Faculty Workshops and Events

At Kent State University, Benhaida’s Office of Global Education offers faculty workshops on teaching in a multicultural classroom. A professor may think a young woman from Saudi Arabia isn’t a good student when she may simply be uncomfortable working on a mixed-gender team or be unaccustomed to speaking up in class. “Start by letting them work in groups with other women at first,” Benhaida tells professors. “Create a platform to encourage participation.”

An increasingly popular strategy is offering small, women-only discussions and events. Several campuses hold women-only swim nights and classes. “You don’t have to be Muslim to appreciate it,” notes Bryn Mawr’s Vanessa Christman. Catrina Salama, a multicultural counselor at Southern Illinois University, facilitates a weekly Women of Color Support group. “They benefit from a safe, nonjudgmental space to discuss their opinions and talk about discrimination they may be facing.” Sometimes the women talk about missing their families back home or even disagreeing with them. “The women students tend to be more progressive so school is their number one priority, but that may not match their families’ priorities for them,” adds Salama. At Southern Illinois, Sandra Tamari, whose background is Palestinian Christian, will speak with students in Arabic, especially about personal issues—though she prefers English for academic discussions.

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ership Retreat for International Women. Held in nearby New Harmony—the site of two former Utopian experiments—it has a certain spiritual quality that transcends cultural and religious boundaries,” says Heidi Gregori-Gahan, assistant provost at the Center for International Programs. She says the program has had a “huge impact in terms of empowerment and skill building,” and led to the creation of a campus organization dedicated to educating and empowering girls and women from developing countries. The university also makes available a training video to help campus police improve communication with Muslim and Arabic-speaking students.

Bryn Mawr hires a few students as facilitators for its StoryCore program (Connecting Over Reflection and Experiences). Students are invited to talk in small groups about whether they feel included on campus and how their experience could be improved.

“It’s a safe, intimate opportunity for peer-to-peer discussions,” explains Christman.

Increased cultural awareness and sensitivity must be built in to programs across the campus. “This should not be just the job of the international office,” advises Benhaida at Kent State. “Mobilize the whole campus community and even the city. We invite the appropriate city agency to campus meetings about bus transportation or housing.” She has noticed more departments hiring people to work with international students in that department. Faisal Alshammeri suggests that universities hire Saudi students to work as liaisons in the international student office. Kent State’s College of Applied Engineering, Sustainability, and Technology planned an international luncheon to wish everyone good luck on exams. The College of Business Administration pairs international students with a domestic mentor.

Integrating and welcoming students can be a balancing act, with the university

demonstrating flexibility, awareness, and sensitivity and students showing determination and openness. “I didn’t expect the university to do anything special for me because I am Middle Eastern,” said Hallaba at the University of Maryland. “I knew I would have to put forth the effort myself.”

Lobna Ismail has asked students about to return home to write one piece of advice on an index card for the next year’s students. A common sentiment? “This will be the toughest year and the best year of your life.” **IE**

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(ENDNOTES)

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