

Influx From the Middle East

With more Middle Eastern students coming to U.S. campuses, international student offices can help these students adapt to U.S. campus culture and meet their cultural needs

ASEEL SAIED dreams of opening a fitness center to teach sportsmanship to young Israelis and Palestinians together. For the moment, this young woman from Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank, is starting her junior year at Bridgewater College in Virginia. “It is a challenge to keep your identity and heritage,” says Saied, “but at the same time, it’s not very nice to feel like you are always different. I’m proud to be Palestinian and Arab and Muslim, but I don’t want to be singled out all the time.”

Saied is particularly grateful for the relationship she developed with Stephanie Wilson, Bridgewater’s director of multicultural services. Wilson became Saied’s mentor on campus, filling a role that a lot of international advisers do. “The number one quality (for a mentor or adviser) is to be a good listener,” says Saied, “besides taking you to Walmart when you need to go!” Wilson says she simply showed a “great willingness to learn of Aseel’s culture, her personal story, and her connection to the world as she saw it.” Wilson provided opportunities for Saied to share her culture in a more formal atmosphere, including finding space for Saied to teach basic Arabic and as Saied describes it, “explain without confronting people that I am a normal student. I am not a terrorist.”

Scholarships Bring Student Surge

Advising students from Middle Eastern countries on U.S. campuses can be as simple as visiting a big box store or as complex as dispelling stereotypes. Yet even as political tensions grow between Middle Eastern governments and the United States, so does the number of Middle Eastern students studying on U.S. campuses, increasing by 33 percent in 2011–12, with a 50 percent increase in students from Saudi Arabia, 38 percent from Qatar, and 72 percent from Oman, according to the International Institute of Education’s *Open Doors 2012* report. The dramatic increases are largely due to government scholarship programs, especially the King Abdullah Scholarships from Saudi Arabia. These scholarships provide full tuition, a stipend for living expenses and health insurance, and airfare back to Saudi

Arabia. Originally intended for 1,000 students when it started in 2005, there are now more than 70,000 Saudi postsecondary scholarship students in the United States, from those learning English with plans to attend college to more advanced students earning degrees and serving medical residencies.

The U.S. State Department has ramped up its services in the Middle East, as “educational advising has risen on the diplomatic agenda in terms of its importance around the world,” according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Meghann Carter. There are now 24 major advising centers in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Libya. The State Department’s EducationUSA offers both in-center services as well as virtual advising through websites and webinars, Google hangouts, Facebook, and Twitter. “Even in countries where we have strained bilateral relations,” says Carter, “there is a recognition that America’s higher education system is excellent.”

The increase in Middle Eastern students—particularly scholarship students—poses both bureaucratic and cultural challenges. “Our profession has tilted toward compliance as contrasted with the previous model of helping people with adjustment,” suggested Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at Michigan State University. Such offices deal directly with foreign embassy counselors assigned to each sponsored scholarship student. “It’s a tricky relationship,” says Judith Van Dyck, director of international student and scholar services at Portland State University. Although the

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ideals. We have students who just have a curiosity, or their parents urged them to come, or their relatives came.”

Van Dyck says some of the scholarship students are less proficient in English when they arrive, so PSU began offering lower-level English classes to help prepare them for college-level courses. Kanaan says there is a cultural component to language that goes beyond understanding every word, and he helps “to bridge that gap. Bring students out of their shell so they can feel safe and comfortable to communicate freely and integrate with the culture.”

Kanaan also tries to defuse problems before they explode. “I need to hold their hands *and* empower them.... If they don’t come to me, they rely on their buddies and they go into a rabbit hole and fail and come to me at the end when there are no solutions.” And deep into that rabbit hole, a Middle Eastern student may conclude not that he didn’t follow the right procedures, but “they saw my name and they don’t like me.”

Cultural Norms Require Adaptation

International student advisers working with students from Middle Eastern countries note several cultural differences that become problems on a U.S. college campus: a more leisurely sense of time, an assumption that grades and deadlines can be negotiated, and a preference for face-to-face or personal communication. A perfect example is the young Saudi student at the counter of a copy store in Arlington, Virginia. Upon picking up a report he had left to be bound, he noticed a duplicate page. The clerk offered to do it over while the young man waited. “No, I can’t. The class has already started,” he said, clutching his homework.

Each cultural difference and challenge requires adjustments on both sides. When a science lab at Northern Arizona University was having issues with students not understanding safety procedures, Andrew Janusz, the coordinator for Sponsored Student Programs, helped the department revise the syllabus to clarify the safety rules. Janusz says professors and administrators need to be “firm but compassionate.” At 8:00 a.m. class begins, but be prepared to listen if a student comes to you with a question. “Don’t look at the time and say ‘I have five minutes,’” says Kanaan. “Middle Easterners don’t get to the point right off the bat. They will keep telling you something and at the end say, ‘Oh, by the way, I have this problem.’” Janusz does presentations for faculty, other university staff, and community groups to expand the arena for cultural understanding. At the University of Illinois, Springfield, Moroccan Driss El-Akrich, director of the intensive English program, says he impresses on students that they are ambassadors of their country and their religion. “If you project a bad image, you are not just impacting yourself. That made a little difference.”

State Department encourages foreign students to get a taste of U.S. college classes with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), Saudi Arabia limits students to six online credits per degree. But whose responsibility is it to keep tabs on the courses a foreign student takes? “Is the sponsor like a parent?” asks Van Dyck. “We don’t interfere. We have told the students to inform their adviser.”

The top four states receiving Saudi scholarship students are California, Texas, Ohio, and Florida, but Portland State University believes it may have the distinction of being the only U.S. university with more students from the Middle East than China. Out of 2,000 foreign students on the PSU campus this fall, 650 are from the Middle East and 500 of those from Saudi Arabia.

“We realized we needed to grow with this trend and serve them in a different way,” says Van Dyck. Palestinian-born Kanaan Kanaan was hired as a Middle East student adviser. “The cultural issues and adapting are different. The difference is the scholarship. It’s a tremendous opportunity but I don’t know if they were driven to come to the U.S. by themselves, through their own toil and their own

Kanaan helped Portland State personalize its approach to communicating with Middle Eastern students. “We rely on 15-minute appointment slots and e-mail to be efficient,” says Van Dyck, “but efficient wasn’t reaching anybody.” Kanaan is deputizing his best students, including those who are leaders of the various nationality clubs on campus, to share important messages within each national group. At Michigan State, sponsored student coordinator Nicole Namy has empowered student leaders to “be the voice for us...both in conveying

messages as well as helping new students over rough spots...When a student is exhausted by communicating in a second language,” says Namy, “it’s nice to come across someone who can communicate in your home language.” At the University of Virginia, that someone could be a member of the Middle East Mentoring Program, which provides one-on-one mentoring for foreign and U.S. students of Middle Eastern heritage. Saudi-born MEMP board member Mohammed ShaVi bursts with welcoming enthusiasm in his online introduction:

“Upon leaving my home country, Saudi Arabia, my mother told me that life’s a box of chocolates and you never know what you are going to get. UVa happened to be the sweetest chocolate I have ever tasted...Get excited for your first year!”

Avoiding the Isolation of the Large Group

It is easy for large groups of foreign students, especially if they come from a single country or region, to become isolated. “The chances for ghetto-ization grow as numbers grow,” notes Carter at the State Department. To discourage what she calls cocooning, Namy encourages all students to make friends outside their cultural group. “The students who find it most difficult to interact would be Saudi women who wear niqab, (covering all but their eyes). That is a hard cultural barrier for domestic students,” she says. “But we don’t want cultural nuances to prevent success. Our goal is never to change people.”

Mody Alkhalaf, assistant attaché for cultural and social affairs at the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, says Saudi students are encouraged to step outside their comfort zone in predeparture orientation sessions in Saudi Arabia and in online videos. She says Saudi women students may need special help with child care and family housing. Saudi women often come to campus with a husband and children or a brother or other family member. Residence halls at Michigan State are now accommodating these married students with families. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when Muslim students need to eat before sunrise and after sunset, the university keeps a few residence halls open after hours and provides a take-away service from the cafeteria. Michigan State also has a very active Community Volunteers for International Programs. CVIP originally provided winter coats for international students and now has nine separate programs including a lending center for household goods, cultural sharing in local elementary schools, English tutoring, conversation classes for families, and a global festival with shared food and performances. At Northern Arizona University, Andrew Janusz arranged for women to have a private workout space in the gym as well as an all-female Zumba class.



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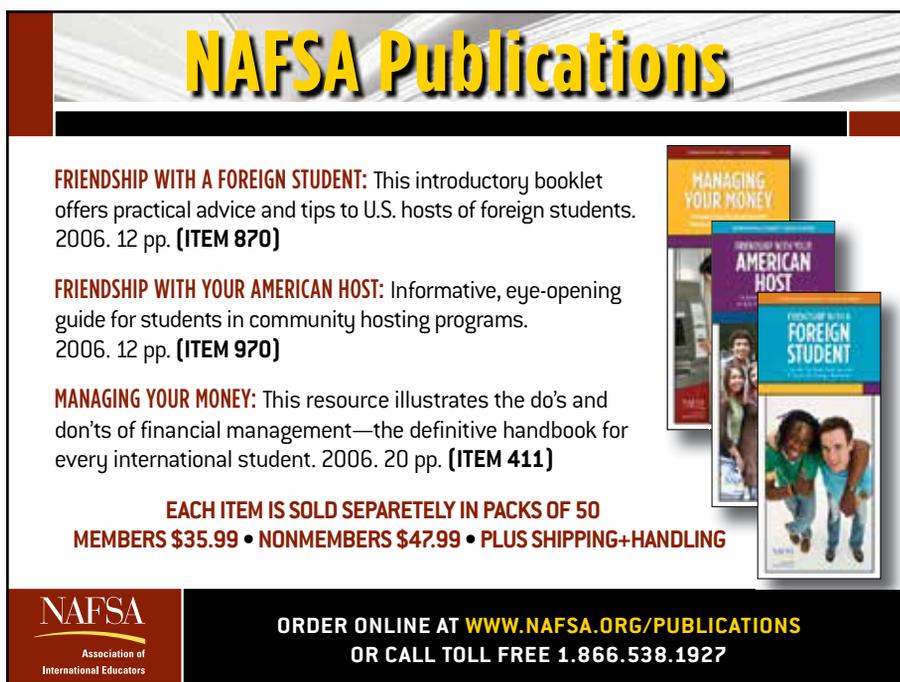
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Enabling the wider community to help nurture the acculturation process, on campus and beyond, brings enormous benefits. Joyce Schwartz is board member and host parent for New Story Leadership, which brings Palestinian and Israeli students to Washington, D.C. for a summer of internships and cross-cultural activities. “Virtually every young person says the most important part of the experience is the host family because of the personal connections.”

The University of Illinois Springfield hosts a weekly coffee hour for the campus at large as well as “conversation partners”—U.S. volunteer students who agree to meet weekly with a particular international student. El-Akrich also recommends careful selection of roommates for Middle Eastern (and other) foreign students. As a student himself, he remembers being paired with an American who wouldn’t communicate with him at all. After three weeks, he found alternative arrangements on his own. At Bridgewater College, six American friends Aseel Saied met in her freshman dorm have become her strongest support group.

Syria Presents a Special Case

Perhaps no situation is more stressful right now than that of Syrian students. One young man blogged that “one year ago, I was totally unaware of what the future was holding for me. I didn’t even know if I was going to continue my study in my college or to pause it until further notice...bombing and fire shooting were happening constantly nearby my university...I knew nothing, and everything was unpredictable.” Now this young man is studying at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), a founding partner in the Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, along with the Institute of International Education and Jusoor, a support group of Syrian expatriates. IIT welcomed more than two dozen Syrian students even before the consortium was organized; this year these Syrian students are planning to organize an art exchange program between Chicago elementary schools and Syrian refugee camps.

More than 35 universities worldwide have agreed to offer scholarships to Syrian students whose education has been inter-

rupted by the crisis. “If every university offers one scholarship to this vulnerable population, we could protect this group,” says Daniela Kaisth, vice president of the Institute of International Education. “They are the future leaders of the country.”

Whether welcoming Syrian students in the midst of a crisis or other Middle Eastern students with limited English and little knowledge of U.S. culture, Portland State’s Kanaan offers four pieces of advice: create a welcoming environment in a physical space that includes artwork from student homelands; build a team of volunteer student leaders who are native speakers of Arabic or other Middle Eastern languages; be prepared to listen; and establish trust—“the trickiest component of all. The first three lead to this one.”

“Cultural competency takes time on both sides,” he concludes. “Open the dialogue and talk.” **IE**

KAREN LEGGETT is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. Her last article for *IE* was “Spanning the GLOBE,” which appeared in the July/August 2013 issue.

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