



Dartmouth-AUKuwait Internship Program Intern Newsletter – Fall 2013 Tyler Rivera '16



“Tyler, how are you going to go to the Middle East if you don’t even speak Muslim?” I don’t blame the woman who asked me this question for her political incorrectness, nor do I believe it was her intent to perpetuate negative misperceptions of the world. I believe that like countless others, she was simply denied access to unbiased representations of the Middle East by contemporary media outlets, resulting in the unconscious dissemination of flawed statements such as hers. In an ideal society, a culturally competent citizenry would be free from the discrimination and stereotyping seemingly endemic within ours, but this is not the world in which I live. This is not the society that prompted me to travel halfway around the world to a country I knew essentially nothing about in order to prove a point.

Going to Kuwait was far more than the opportunity to mark another nation off of my wanderlust checklist. It was a pilgrimage into the unknown—an adventure from beginning to end with little structure and even less guidance. For the first time in my entire life, I felt the freedom of complete independence. Like driving alone for the first time after getting your license, the liberation from the obligations I left behind was exhilarating. I was free to make as much or as little out of my time in Kuwait as I desired, and my choices hinged entirely upon my will. Knowing that my failures and successes were to be determined solely by my actions and inaction granted me unprecedented efficacy, and for once I felt truly in control. With this exploration of self-empowerment came a simultaneous realization of newfound self-awareness—Kuwait not only heightened my sense of the external, but of what existed *within* me as well. Spending the term in Kuwait was an undoubtedly transformative experience, and the ways in which it has shaped me will continue to impact my life for years to come.

Moving to Kuwait

Although the comparison might seem natural, moving to Kuwait was nothing like going away for college. As a college freshman, you share the same apprehensions, anxieties, and excitement as the other members of your class. You all attend orientation together, you all get lost on campus at some point, and you all definitely have the enthusiasm for college that is absent in your senior counterparts. These unifying experiences allow you to easily befriend and bond with your classmates over what you have shared. Moving to Kuwait was anything but similar to this. I was alone—inextricably and entirely alone. Not a single person residing in Kuwait had ever heard of me, let alone within the entire Middle East. My face was unfamiliar to all and my experience shared by no one. This was the scariest aspect of moving to Kuwait for me, as nothing in my life up until that point had prepared me for this feeling of solitude. These

fears, however, quickly subsided upon my arrival in Kuwait, giving way to gratefulness for the immediate warmth I would receive at the American University of Kuwait (AUK).

The transition into life in Kuwait was relatively smooth. Beyond my acclimation to the time difference and the *dramatic* temperature difference (regularly exceeding 114° F), I quickly became accustomed to the everyday differences in life within Kuwait. I learned how to grocery shop for myself, I figured out how to work a dual washer-dryer machine, and I got used to converting all of my dinar into dollars in my head. In many ways, in fact, living in Kuwait was just like living in a hotter, dustier, and somewhat more extravagant America. But these similarities, did not keep me from identifying the major differences between Kuwait and America: the immense number of South Asian guest workers in Kuwait, especially those working as maids, the relative absence of male-female platonic friendships, and the general lack of environmental concern amongst the populous. But I couldn't dwell on these differences for too long, because I was quickly consumed by my work at AUK.



The Avenues Mall – a place to escape the heat.

Working at AUK

Although slightly less than 1/3 of my time in Kuwait was spent there, AUK is where I met the kindest people, shared the most interesting experiences, and made the fondest memories.

The Office of Student Life

I started and ended each day at AUK in the Office of Student Life. This was by far the most fun and entertaining of my placements, and where I would go on to make my closest friends in Kuwait. Student Life is responsible for a variety of on-campus services at AUK, including programming of campus-wide events and activities, administration of all AUK clubs



Election Poster – I am on the right holding the “VOTE?” sign.

and organizations, as well as a variety of other duties that fall under the office's catchall jurisdiction. I was initially apprehensive of where I would fit into the already well-established office culture, but this anxiety was quickly dissolved after playing our first game of office charades. No two days in Student Life were the same, with a new task or challenge arising each day. I assisted in setting up and coordinating AUK's student government elections, I collaborated with faculty and staff on how to kick start interest in the student newspaper, and I participated in meetings on how to improve the student experience at AUK. I would go on to

learn that my role in the Office of Student Life was not restricted to particular responsibilities, but, much like the office itself, was flexible in terms of duties and obligations.

What made working in Student Life so amazing was not, however, the tasks I carried out as part of my placement, but rather the amazing people that I worked alongside. The office itself is composed of permanent staff, many of whom are alumni of AUK themselves, as well as a number of student workers attending AUK. Collectively, Student Life was by far one of the most diverse groups of people I have ever encountered, with individuals identifying as everything from Bengali to Canadian and Egyptian to Filipino. Not only this, but my daily interactions with university students who came into the office allowed me to engage with a wide spectrum of individuals from a variety of other backgrounds and experiences. I cherished the opportunity to converse with anyone and everyone regardless of the subject, and I truly feel this allowed me to experience a side of Kuwait many could never imagine. Topics of discussion included ranking the Harry Potter movies, why alligator meat is considered *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law), the benefits and consequences of a two-state solution, and the latest food trends in Kuwait. They taught me how to swear in Arabic and I taught them some American slang, and although at first glance we may not have had much in common, the things that we shared transcended race, religion, nationality, and geography.

The Writing Center

My second placement, and the most rewarding of the three, was in the Writing Center at AUK. The Writing Center fulfills the same role as RWIT does at Dartmouth, offering students the opportunity to schedule an appointment with a consultant who will help them at whatever stage of the writing process they are in. I spent my first two weeks in the center observing other tutors, learning the best methods for effective sessions, and trying to understand how I could apply what I knew about writing in order to resolve other students' challenges. Once I had thoroughly shadowed other consultants, I began to assist students with their work on my own. I helped students clarify theses and condense wordy passages, identify grammar errors and alter verb tenses, rewrite project proposals and edit reader responses. With each session came something different and unexpected, and with each session I honed my ability to help students overcome the problems they faced. Students told me they appreciated my innate understanding of the English language, and many scheduled multiple sessions with me, often times during the same week. I came to know many of the students I helped outside of the Writing Center too, frequently seeing them around campus and even going to get coffee with a few of them towards the end of the term.

What was perhaps most interesting about working in the Writing Center was realizing that regardless of differences in language and methods in instruction, students at AUK faced the same challenges with their writing as students in America and around the world. Yet with persistence, a willingness to embrace change, and a little advice along the way, each student I

helped in the Writing Center was more than capable of overcoming problems with their writing. It was beyond satisfying to see the students I tutored grow as writers, and I can only hope that the sessions I shared with them will continue to aid them in their lifelong relationship with writing and the writing process.

Center for Gulf Studies

My third placement, and the most open-ended of the three, was in the Center for Gulf Studies (CGS). The CGS at AUK is a research center focused on promoting greater cultural awareness and intellectual interest in the Gulf. The Center does so through the facilitation of events and lectures at AUK focused on issues of importance to the Gulf, the support of research in and on the Gulf, and the creation of an environment conducive to engagement with the Gulf across a variety of disciplines. When I arrived at the CGS, the Center itself was undergoing a period of transition, as one of two permanent staff had recently left and the new projects coordinator was just entering into her new position. My placement in the CGS, therefore, became a learning experience for the Center as a whole. My first few weeks consisted of vaguely defined responsibilities that forced me to reevaluate what I was specifically interested in doing with the Center. After this brief period of uncertainty, however, I quickly took on new responsibilities that not only piqued my interests but contributed greatly to the CGS as well.

For the remainder of my time with the CGS I took charge of two different projects: I wrote and designed a daily newsletter composed of the top stories and articles from around the Gulf, and I authored a comprehensive research guide of resources, research centers, and databases with information on the Gulf region. Although the less challenging of the two assignments, the daily newsletter was quite time consuming, requiring at least an hour each day to sort through articles and decide which ones to include in the briefing. Reading these articles, however, gave me a chance to learn significantly more about life and culture not only in Kuwait, but also in the Gulf as a whole. The resource guide challenged me in different ways than the newsletter, testing my ability to conduct comprehensive research and provide thorough findings while still meeting deadlines set by my advisor. Through my placement with the CGS, I was able to not only contribute projects that will continue to be used by the CGS for years, but I was able to gain the professional experience that will undoubtedly be of use in my future pursuits.

Life in Kuwait

There are interesting side effects of moving to a new country that I had no way of anticipating prior to my term in Kuwait. Of course in the beginning everything was new and fascinating all at the same time—the malls were enormous, the food was different, and there were so many new faces. After the glimmer of moving to Kuwait wore off, however, the city that I was once on awe of became a string of incompatible nuisances and annoying differences that made me want to go home. The first side effect was obvious—I severely missed my friends and family and spent a significant amount of time just trying to distract myself from the thoughts of

what I was missing out on. Second, I began to miss things about home that I never even thought to care about: I missed the sidewalks, I missed the milk, I missed watching the local news, and



Photo wall in the intern apartment of my friends and family.

plenty of other things that just didn't matter. The final and most unexpected side effect of moving to Kuwait was how strangely patriotic I became. I never considered myself to be a particularly patriotic person, and I have never shied away from criticizing America for its many flaws. But once I was in Kuwait, everything about the America I loved just seemed infinitely better—the Internet in America was better, people didn't litter as much in

America, there were more museums in America, and American television eclipsed anything on Kuwaiti TV. I struggled to reconcile these challenges for the first few weeks, and they undoubtedly took their toll on my happiness.

Only after I was able to overlook these minor differences, however, was I able to truly enjoy my time in Kuwait. Life in Kuwait seemed to occur at a much slower pace than in America, with people taking hours for coffee breaks and entire days at the seaside for picnics. Everyone was extremely hospitable, and went out of their way to make me feel at home in Kuwait. My neighbors invited me to their Halloween party, I enjoyed midday breaks for hookah with other staff members, and my coworkers introduced me to an assortment of delicious foods. I realized that I wasn't able to enjoy Kuwait before because I didn't want to enjoy it—I let myself be dissatisfied with my experience, rather than trying to make the most out of a once in a lifetime opportunity. Once I came to understand this conundrum though, I did everything in my power to find happiness in Kuwait, and this ultimately turned out to be beyond successful

Reflections

I am cautiously optimistic about the future of AUK and Kuwait. As AUK continues to change the scope of higher education in Kuwait, it will certainly go on to establish the traditions and institutional memory that it currently lacks but greatly needs. The problems that face graduates of AUK and Kuwait as a whole, however, are complex and will require creativity and innovation on the part of young and enterprising individuals in order to resolve. I know that with time, AUK will grow to become a model for higher education throughout the Gulf, and its role within the changing landscape of Kuwait will become indispensable.

I came to Kuwait not knowing what I wanted or what to expect—the entire experience from the moment I took my first step off the plane to my last goodbyes before leaving was new and exhilarating. All I knew when I applied is that I wanted to prove to everyone that the differences we perceive between peoples, nations, and societies are really just superficial constructs that dissolve when effort is put into forging meaningful relationships. I travelled alone

to Kuwait and not only survived, but thrived in the face of the unknown. There are many things that I will miss about Kuwait: taking walks along the shore while the desert sun sets behind the skyline of the city, the abundance of places to shop, having an inexhaustible assortment of restaurants to eat at, and most of all, the unbridled generosity that I experienced on a daily basis from the people I came to know and love. I am beyond grateful for having the chance to see and experience Kuwait, if only for a short time, and I am positive that no matter what fate holds in store, it will certainly return me to this land of diversity and wonder.



My last night in Kuwait.