



**Dartmouth-AUKuwait Internship Program**  
**Intern Newsletter – Spring 2014**  
**Mary Ivancic '14**



## **New Challenges: My Transformative Term in Kuwait**

In Winter 2014, I realized that, after my formative experiences in Morocco, it was time I ventured to the Middle East, to Kuwait. As someone who has taken a strong interest in issues related to access to higher education, I wanted to get exposure to the administrative side of an institution while continuing to explore Arabic and new cultures.

In March 2014, I found myself being welcomed to Kuwait by a powerful red sunrise over a deserted desert highway, as my supervisor tried to explain to my sleep-deprived self the layout of the district in which I would be living and working. At the University I was placed in three separate offices and departments: my primary placement was in Student Life, and the rest of my time was divided between Student Affairs and the Writing Center.

### **Working at the University**

*Writing Center.* At the Writing Center I spent the majority of my time assisting students with their assignments and essays. The drop-in nature of the Writing Center made it easy to meet a variety of students studying a range of different subjects. My job was both challenging and extremely rewarding. I worked with students ranging from those just beginning to study English to those writing research papers on global conflicts.

Whether I was working with a student I had worked with before or someone in a drop-in appointment, it was difficult to know what to expect of both the assignment and the student's needs. Sometimes students were well prepared and just needed help with citations, other times they were still in the brainstorming phase or needed help structuring their argument and developing a thesis. It was extremely rewarding to see students come in with multiple drafts in which they showed marked improvement, knowing that I had played a role in helping them produce a more polished final paper.

In working closely with students it was easy to get to know subtle aspects of Kuwaiti culture, especially when their topics were more personal. Also, it helped me with my Arabic, surprisingly, as some of the beginning level English students were unable to express their thoughts completely in English. I felt that my background in Arabic helped me relate to the students in ways I otherwise would not have been able to do.

Aside from assisting students as a Writing Consultant, I worked on streamlining the training manuals for Writing Consultants and Tutors. This task allowed me to gain a better understanding of the structure of these departments and learn about how the university trained student workers. Working with both students and on an independent project really allowed me to connect with the university community and gave me the satisfaction of knowing that the work I was doing was meaningful.

*Student Affairs.* Student Affairs deals with many different issues, including Career Services, Alumni Affairs, Student Government, and Counseling and Advising. I wrote articles for the alumni newsletter and even participated in institutional research, gathering data about other Middle Eastern universities for the formation of a peer group.

During my internship, one of the main issues on campus was the structure and function of the Student Government Association. AUK students usually held elections in the spring, elections with which I had anticipated assisting. This year, however, there was controversy surrounding the validity of the constitution and when the elections should be held. As a result I participated in community wide town-hall style meetings, met with students and administrators voicing their concerns, worked on the development of a task force to compose a new constitution and witnessed all manner of debate and protest. I saw the enthusiasm and passion with which students questioned how their interests were expressed to the administration and how their system of representation succeeded and failed in addressing their concerns. It was a beautiful representation of democracy at work and the exchange of so many different opinions and perspectives represented both the diversity and the unity of the AUK student body.

While this discussion was a challenge for the university administration, it also presented me with the opportunity to understand how different offices work together to meet students' needs. The issues surrounding SGA allowed me to witness the strength of the AUK community, role of the administration in handling student affairs, and also enabled me to see the values AUK students appreciated and how their understanding of a liberal arts education. Being a part of the team that worked with SGA during this time was a rewarding and educational part of my internship.

*Student Life.* My main placement was in the Department of Student Life, working on everything from the Art Exhibition to the Awards night, from helping with athletic activities to working the front desk. I had interesting assignments and the opportunity to meet students from across campus, in addition to gaining a broad view of the activities of students on AUK's campus. Because I am interested in pursuing a career relating to Student Life, this portion of the internship gave me critical exposure to the operations of different aspects of university life from an administrative perspective.

I daily fielded students' questions about various campus events, supported athletic activities, organized and managed the front desk and met with students. I gained a better understanding of what their college experiences were like and I found it particularly interesting to discuss what going to college requires in Kuwait. While AUK campus life is strong, particularly by Kuwait standards, it pales in comparison to that of Dartmouth. With AUK being a commuter school, I was interested to see how students straddle their desire to have a strong interest in university life and also maintain a strong relationship with their family. It struck me how most students were pursuing a college degree for practical career reasons despite AUK being a liberal arts college. The understanding and value of a liberal arts education was discussed by students, but has little value in the larger Kuwaiti society, thus rendering it secondary to professional pursuits. Given the interest-based means by which Dartmouth students tend to select their majors, it was interesting to see how much focus AUK students place on utility rather than personal satisfaction when selecting a major. Seeing how students' expectations of their university careers differ from those of

Dartmouth students was a valuable opportunity.

My main project during my time in Student Life was the Awards Night. This annual event is held to honor students' academic and extracurricular achievements, as well as those who have shown exceptional service to the university. My responsibilities included the guest list, invitations, and the event program. As an added challenge, the department director left town the day before the event. This pushed me to take on extra responsibilities and I learned how to consolidate information from a variety of different sources into a streamlined finished product. Awards Night was by far the most demanding project I worked on.

My time in Student Life was rarely dull, due in part to the popularity of the office, driven by its open door policy, and especially thanks to the incredible spirit and energy of the staff members. Everyday I was amazed at their enthusiasm. A few of the staff members were former AUK students, which gave me the opportunity to hear how the university had evolved since their time as students. The fluidity with which students and Student Life staff interacted was impressive. At times it was clear that students did not see certain staff members as authority figures, but as just another friend. This dynamic, while a bit

unnerving at first, became one of the aspects I valued most in the office, as it provided me with the chance to have open discussions with both students and staff.



My colleagues surprised me on my birthday, just a few days into my internship!

The role of intern can be a difficult one, particularly at a university like AUK. A college student myself, I straddled the line between staff

member and student, professional and familiar.

## Living in Kuwait

When I left Dartmouth for Kuwait, I planned to room with another Dartmouth student in the AUK-owned apartment. Due to a last minute visa issue I had to go alone. While at first I worried that my lack of a roommate would be difficult, in the end I think it significantly enhanced the life I had outside of work. My isolation drove me to make friends and to find new things to do on the weekend.

I met some really great people at the university who quickly became my friends. Whether we went out to watch a soccer match or other sporting event, a concert or just had a relaxing evening playing video games and ordering in, I found that the friends I made were genuinely fun and kind people. They took me out for dinner on my birthday, drove me around the city, played volleyball with me, showed me the old souks, introduced me to traditional Kuwaiti cuisine and kept me sane throughout my time in Kuwait. It was such a joy to get to know people with different cultures and perspectives, but still form such meaningful connections with them. So while I was worried living alone would mean

complete social isolation, it really enabled me to branch out into the community in ways I never would have been able to otherwise.

I had time alone, but I was never left without something to do. I am not a fan of malls and despite their vast popularity amongst those living in Kuwait I rarely visited them. They are certainly a sight to see, miles (literally) of stores lined up, sprinkled with every restaurant under the sun. If you are a shopper, Kuwait is paradise. I, however, fancied another commercial location: the grocery store.

I love to cook and four years in college dorms, with a brief intermission in off-campus housing my sophomore summer, provided few opportunities for me to cook all of my meals. So while others would be spending their Friday mornings (the weekend is Friday and Saturday in Kuwait) I woke at the crack of dawn to beat the heat and get my grocery shopping done.

I could spend hours in a grocery store and the apartment is located within walking distance of several. I looked forward each week to wandering the aisles, looking for a new spice or tropical fruit I could experiment with in my recipes. The relatively low cost of produce and pantry staples made this an even more enjoyable experience.

Aside from spending my weekends in grocery stores and my kitchen, I enjoyed walking around Salmiya, trying to find an intriguing little market or restaurant, exercising, or just people watching—that is, before the temperatures soared above 100° F. Once the temperatures rose, it became more difficult to venture out during the day, so I turned to reading, watching Netflix—thanks Dartmouth VPN!—and brushing up on my Arabic with old textbooks.

The heat did not keep me inside all of the time. I joined the women's volleyball team for practice every week and surprisingly became accustomed to the scorching temperatures. It was nice to have a physical outlet, because Kuwait is definitely most accessible by car and exercise can be hard to come by. This provided me the opportunity to meet even more AUK students and get a more hands on perspective of how athletics were run at the university.



A man makes traditional street bread in the old souk

Whether it was with friends or by myself my free time was full of new and fun experiences and, thankfully, a lot of time to relax after four long years of a Dartmouth-paced life.



One of several sand sculptures at an outdoor exhibit

### **Culture in Kuwait**

Before coming to Kuwait, I spent significant time in Morocco, getting to live in a Muslim society and culture. I was not too affected by culture shock as a result, but that is not to say that Morocco and Kuwait are similar. I was used to seeing women covered and wearing the hijab; I was used to the calls from the mosques for the five daily prayers; I had already adapted the use of common Arabic phrases and had a strong foundation in the Islamic faith to know what was acceptable and what would possibly make others uncomfortable. In that regard I found the transition fairly easy.

Not everything was easy to get accustomed to. The rigid social structures that exist in Kuwait frustrated me and I let them dominate my impression of Kuwaiti society in the beginning of my internship. Whether it was the commonality of live-in maids, the cliques, or the excess and indulgence in material goods, I found it difficult at first to connect to Kuwaiti culture in any meaningful way. Over time, however, I gained perspective from my friends and colleagues about why these social structures exist and why students and adults alike care so much about appearances and material goods. These conversations helped me appreciate Kuwaiti culture and afforded me the opportunity to engage those around me in reflective discussion.

In the end my time in Kuwait was full of great challenges and equally significant rewards. Kuwait was only my home for ten short weeks, but the experiences I had there in and outside of the university helped me grow as a professional and, more importantly, as a citizen of a global society.



Me and two colleagues on my last day in Kuwait