Flying into Kuwait, I recall looking out of the window, just to

capture what my first impression of the country would be. "How exciting," I thought, "I get to see it before I land!" I was shocked by a sight I only thought possible in movies and instantly reminded of the scene from the film Holes where the teenage campers worked in a vast barren desert. Sand and few trees – that was my first impression of Kuwait. As the plane descended, only then did the small picture of a populated city come into view.

After the plane landed, someone donned in a red jacket, holding a sign with my name on it, greeted me. This Filipino woman helped me to get my visa, took me through customs, and made me feel secure entering this new country. Suddenly, I felt a boost of confidence in receiving such a welcome to this foreign place. By the time I was through the airport, a certain sense of security was in the air. Unfortunately, it was then I was hit with two pieces of news: 1) I was to stay in a new unused apartment a fairly long way from campus and 2) I would not have Wi-Fi immediately. Encountering two unfamiliar situations, I had to find new ways to adapt to my surroundings, which added to the whole learning experience.

Although I constantly doubted my abilities, I met the challenges I faced. My main mentor in the American University of Kuwait (AUK) Information Technology (IT) department generously offered to give me a ride every day to and from work, and a graphic design professor at AUK allowed me to use her router until I had Wi-Fi access. Living in a building with other AUK faculty and staff gave me that added bonus. I was warmly welcomed by the tenants to the building and at the AUK community get-togethers. While the transportation made it difficult to have flexible hours, I could take advantage of the www.6alabat.com delivery food service, which taught me about travel, directions, and communication in Kuwait.

Acceptance (IT)

I made the IT department my primary placement, which turned out to be an excellent decision. It was diverse in its divisions and would help me to focus on my interests in IT when I returned to Dartmouth. I remember being disappointed initially with the prospect of shadowing more than working but I was received well by Zeina Itani, my mentor. The IT department at AUK consisted of about 15 employees:

Rusty Bruns, IT Director
Hussein Diab, Senior Database Administrator
Nezam Hamzeh, Senior Multimedia Coordinator
Zeina Itani, System Unit Administrator
Carla Saliba, Senior Administrative Assistant
Hossam Omar, Network Specialist
Ali Beda, Technical Support
Ali Asgar, Technical Support
Munawar Mullaji, Multimedia Specialist
Abed-Al-Rahman Y Al Mahani, Technical Support
Shaik Mehboob, System Administrator
Faeq Abu-Khair, Network Administrator
Heba Al Dalo, System Analyst
Hakim Bhungrawala, Systems Support Specialist
Daniel Lasrado, Technical Support
Nabegh Al Thalji, Application Developer

IT Department (L to R): (back row) Faeq, Hakim, Shaik, Rusty, Munawar, Hussein, Hossam, Ali Asgar; (front row) Shloka, Carla, Heba, Zeina; not pictured Abed, Ali Beda, Nezam, Nabegh, Daniel

This was the first time an intern had worked in the department, so it was a new experience for both parties. My task became to rotate through all the departments and various fields and receive personal training and instruction in all.

I became part of the IT family, with each member instructing and advising me on jobs and career options in the IT field. I followed every member of that family for a week, shadowing and learning all about their jobs and duties in university life.

During my first two weeks in IT, I sat by Zeina's side in technical support as she walked me through every aspect of her job, going into detail about print managers, the Helpdesk application, and various others. Several times I recall Abed, Zeina's right-hand man in tech support, speaking very excitedly about the different issues with PCs. I recall very funny exchanges and differences of opinion between Zeina and Abed, specifically that when there was a problem, Zeina would call through the IT department, "Abed!"

In Technical Support, IT became as demanding and emotional and mentally taxing as when I shadowed a neurologist after taking some science classes at Dartmouth, which piqued my interest in medicine. Those were suddenly realized as I saw Tech Support making "house-calls" to offices and professors, setting up PCs, reformatting information, fixing equipment and permissions for online access, constantly resetting passwords. I learned a lot about human and professional relations when shadowing tech support.

There was a certain amount of authority and familiarity with the school that came with being in tech support. The first week, I was checking the computers in every classroom and every building, leaving me with a very good understanding of the entire campus and the people on it. I felt a sense of importance going into classrooms with my student ID, fixing a PC, and finding I knew more about computers than I thought.

Rusty Bruns's presence added a new dynamic to my internship. Rusty was the new IT Director from the United States. Arriving at AUK two weeks after I did, he didn't realize that I was from the US at first because of my nationality and appearance. (I am of Indian descent and many Indians live and work in Kuwait). We soon became better acquainted, living in the same building and carpooling every morning. I recall how much

fun it was to listen to Zeina and Rusty every morning, going back and forth about work, Kuwait, and various sites. Rusty was another American experiencing Kuwait and AUK for the first time. It was fun comparing how we each adjusted to our surroundings, and seeing how we were accepted by the AUK community.

In my third week, I moved on to Database, where I saw how the records, data, and systems were managed at AUK. I looked forward to this rotation because of my extensive experience with Microsoft Access. Here, I had my first most instructional experience with SQL, a programming language used to construct databases and queries, and was given a book on SQL to study each day for four hours. I also had a computer "playground" account to practice the exercises. I impressed myself getting through 6 chapters of the book.

Next came Multimedia, and with this new field came another sense of authority and security. I learned about interactive devices, projectors, screens, lighting, and sound systems, and accompanied the staff on routine checks and installations in the classrooms. Because this department was involved in the main entertainment events on campus, I participated in some of them during my work hours, including a Bollywood dance seminar, where I met other students who shared my interests in Bollywood. Working with Munawar Mullaji, the Multimedia Specialist, I was even able to witness Student Government elections and hear speeches given by students in English and Arabic.

AUK Student giving campaign
speech for Student Government
Elections

Finally, Hakim Bhungrawala, Faeq Abu-Khair, and Hossam Omar instructed me in system, mail, and networks, with focuses on firewalls, system managers, and servers. They showed me the school's server and communication rooms and explained the workings of networks and information pathways through campus. With the individualized instruction and the manuals they provided, I gained a tremendous amount of new knowledge. I was even allowed to work with the Cisco phone managing system. These weeks were unique in that I could see the importance of an IT department and networks to a young university.

One of the best things about working in IT was the food. Because the IT department tends to work through break periods, sometimes employees skip lunch. But the IT department did not have to worry. Heba Al Dalo would send out for Fatayer, a Middle Eastern cheese/herb-filled pastry. One week, Hussein Diab went out and brought kebabs. Another time someone brought pizza, then Indian food. Once in a while, someone would bring in Syrian, Lebanese, Iranian, or Egyptian sweets, all generously

topped with pistachios. Conveniently, I could learn about Middle Eastern food from the comfort of my own IT desk.

Perception (CS Research)

At the start of my internship, I learned about the roles and perception of Indians in Kuwait, and specifically how I might be considered of a lower class because of my Indian background and appearance. I found there were many Indians in Kuwait. But rather than this being a divisive factor, it brought me closer to the locals. More than any other question, the most common one asked was: "Are you from India?" I remember receiving lots of questions from students and staff at AUK about my Indian background. The janitorial staff, the employees at the Diner, receptionists at various buildings, even taxi drivers, all showed me a bit more kindness and warmth knowing of my Indian background. There were so many Indian people; even the Kuwaiti dialect of Arabic has some Hindi influences.

The Indians I met reminded me of my father. He came to Kuwait to work as an engineer before he came to the US. That family experience was now first-hand for me. The surprising part was to find many "Konkanis". Konkani is my mother tongue, so Konkanis are people who speak the language. The immersion in this language suddenly brought back experiences from my childhood, when I would fluently converse in the tongue. And being in a country with so many Indians, I was also able to bring sweets on Diwali, an Indian holiday very important in my cultural upbringing.

Thus I felt like a chameleon -- with my American life and Indian background -- able to fit into any demographic or group. Because of my background, I was mistaken for a student, a graduate student, a professor, and an employee at AUK. Although my accent was a clear indication of my nationality, at AUK I felt an acceptance of and flexibility about my identity that I never had before. If I needed to be American, I could. If I needed to be Indian, I could. It was a new and fascinating experience.

Gender also became important. Because of government regulations governing private higher education at AUK, many classes are separated by gender. People at AUK had many strong views on gender segregation. I researched and discussed this issue, both formally and informally, specifically with a focus on how it affected the computer science field. I also worked with a professor on an idea for Microsoft's Imagine Cup competition, trying to develop a game to encourage gender equality and interest in computing for women. It was a total immersion into gender issues.

For me, Feminism has always been an issue of professional equality, not superiority. Consequently, I tended to stay away from many feminist ideals, but this experience at AUK brought to the surface very strong feelings I had about women's issues, especially about marriage and education.

I had the opportunity to work with Computer Science professors Dr. Amir Zeid and Dr. Mohamad Awad, who taught me so much about Kuwait and about different types of research in Computer Science. Working on social networks with Dr. Awad and working with Dr. Zeid on Women in Computing was very instructive and enjoyable. It also was helpful to work with two professors who had both previously worked at Dartmouth as AUK Fellows.

Passion (Music)

Music, something I had left behind after high school, was brought back into my life during my internship at AUK. I took full advantage of the opportunity in several ways.

Participating in the annual Dartmouth-AUK recital, I was able to work with Anna Karadimitrova, Elena Tsenkova, and Dagmara Bienias, all private instructors at AUK. With their instruction, I performed on guitar, piano, and voice for the recital. It was a truly cathartic experience. I was able to play pieces I hadn't played in five or six years and to learn new ones. While nerve-wracking, being the only representative from Dartmouth in the recital, it was also a lot of fun.

My "extra" placement was as a teaching assistant for the guitar classes at AUK. Indulging two of my loves, teaching and music, I was able to help students with their playing while gaining confidence in my own abilities. Because it was a 200 (or lower level) class, it was segregated by gender. I was a teaching assistant for separate male and female classes, which allowed me to see first-hand the benefits and restrictions of a segregated environment.

Identity (Writing Center)

My final placement was in the Writing Center. Discussing various topics with students and staff from university research to social media, I solidified my own views, my identity, and my personality through finding those who shared my views and had similar cultural backgrounds.

My advisor was Professor James McDougall, Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center. Working in the Center, I learned a lot about English and how it is acquired, reading and editing essays of students on various topics. I was also able to apply my computer interests in helping to develop the Online Writing Lab (OWL) for the university with Hanouf Al Juhail, another employee in the center. With my desktop publishing background, I first helped with promotional poster design. Then I consolidated the OWL's resource pages into navigable "wikis" and condensed web links. Lastly, I helped with the development of a virtual writing center, where students could receive feedback to their papers online. I even sat in some of Dr. McDougall's Asian American literature classes, contributing to the discussions on the perceptions and realities of being an Asian-American.

In the Writing Center, I also developed a deep friendship with Sara and Nur Soliman, who shared my interests in British comedies, music, and "old-fashioned" things. Sara had recently returned from an internship at Dartmouth and Nur held that same summer internship in 2009.

The Writing Center students and staff

There was a lot of sight-seeing

as well. I saw the Kuwait Towers, Friday Market, the Tareq Rejab Calligraphy Museum, the Scientific Centre, Sadu House, and a flamenco guitarist at the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Thanks must be given to Jill Algier (University Registrar) and her husband Dave, as well as my host Tadd Kruse, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs.

Probably the most reassuring and surprising part of Kuwait is how much like the United States it really is. For example, one does not need to know Arabic, and most of the Americans I met who have lived in Kuwait for some time could speak only a few words and phrases of Arabic. Kuwait is the "melting pot" of the Middle East, with Kuwaitis in the minority. Other groups represented include, Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians, Indians, and various other ethnic groups.

Me, in front of Kuwait Towers

The fact that so many groups coexist in this small country is unforgettable. I hope that I will be able to meet with my friends and return to AUK again at some point in my life. This experience was life-changing and I have definitely grown and become a worldlier person from it. I will never in my life forget the kindness the AUK employees showed me, how generous they were, and how interested they were in my story and my abilities and how I could work with them. I am especially grateful for the hospitality of the AUK students who stayed at Dartmouth (Nada Bedir, Sara Soliman, Nur Soliman, and Hala Botros) with whom I hope to stay in touch in the future.

Shloka, Sara, Nada, and Hala at the Chocolate Bar