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WORKING AT AUK

As an intern at the American University in Kuwait (AUK), I came to understand the challenges that start-up universities face and how faculty members work to resolve them. I also acknowledged the important role that faculty members play in helping their students understand the importance and value of a liberal arts education, in a society, which has traditionally valued business and technology. My work in three distinct departments at the university enabled me to see how these challenges play out at an administrative level as well as in the classroom. I worked to develop a "Spanish Survival" course, served as a teaching assistant for beginning Spanish courses, and wrote articles for the Public Relations and Marketing office. All of this activity, combined with living in Kuwait contributed to an unbeatable experience that helped me to value my liberal arts education and grow on a personal and professional level. This experience has not only left me with a number of valuable lessons, but also rich memories that have shifted my views of life in the Middle East.

SURVIVAL SPANISH

Since I value the importance of the study of foreign language as a way to understand and communicate with other cultures, I dedicated most my time to the development of a "Survival Spanish" course for AUK's Center of Continuing Education, which offers an array of practical courses to community members living in Kuwait. The idea for the course came from an already-developed course at AUK called "Survival Arabic," which is intended to give students a basic knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic in a short period of time. My experience with teaching and studying Spanish, as well as a recent demand at AUK for a Spanish course, is what sparked the idea to develop "Survival Spanish".

Having no prior experience working on such a project, I saw it as a creative challenge that included deciding what concepts of Spanish grammar and vocabulary would help a student survive in a Spanish speaking country. Researching other introductory Spanish books and recalling the books that I used when I began my study of foreign languages eased the process. From there I developed a personal style and technique that I applied to a ten-chapter workbook that I created specially for this course. The workbook included key concepts to learning the Spanish language and each chapter featured a section on vocabulary, a grammar focus, and activities that reinforced the concepts of each lesson.

Overall, I learned the importance of keeping the target audience in mind when designing a course and how that affects the pedagogical as well as the visual aspects of the workbook. At times I had to rethink incorporating certain vocabulary sets, especially holidays, which in Spanish language books teach vocabulary related to Christian religious traditions... Arabic language books use vocabulary sets related to holidays in the Islamic tradition. In the development of this course I had to carefully observe the ways in which language is a reflection of the culture in which it is used and question the practicality of certain vocabulary sets for who might potentially use the workbook. I hope to continue my work on similar projects that involve learning a foreign language.

GETTING TO KNOW AUK

For Public Relations and Marketing, I covered campus events and student activities for AUK's website. I wrote articles for the *Chronicle*, a publication for AUK's faculty and staff. My work for Public Relations and Marketing gave me the opportunity to observe a number of student-run events and also to be in contact with some of AUK's faculty members who gave their insights on the university.

View of AUK

For a young university, AUK has a large number of student organizations. The Marketing Club stands out for student participation and for the popular events it puts on annually, including the "Car Boot Sale," in which the university's entire parking lot is used for people to sell unwanted items from the trunks of their vehicles. The event attracted a crowd from the university and the surrounding community.

I was fortunate to attend the first student-run Women in Business conference, which sought to empower and encourage Kuwaiti women to enter the business world despite the obstacles that they might face. The three-day conference featured several panel discussions that dealt specifically with the ways in which Kuwaiti women can overcome obstacles in the business world and negotiate between professional and societal expectations. The conference also included many engaging workshops led by AUK faculty members who presented on many aspects of the business world, for example marketing and networking.

Sea band performing at Al-Kout festival

One of the most outstanding events was the Al-Kout festival, put on by the Arabian Heritage Project at AUK. This festival aimed to raise awareness of traditions unique to the Arabian Gulf and featured all things tied to traditional Kuwaiti culture, including Sawt music, Bedouin music, and the presence of a traditionally dressed Bedouin family. I was grateful to participate in this festival and learn about some of Kuwait's more overlooked cultural aspects.

I also worked on a series of articles for a section of the AUK *Chronicle* called "Faculty Profiles," which was intended to highlight the accomplishments of faculty members and reveal a little about their non-academic lives. Through my interviews, I gained insight on how faculty members view AUK students.

Each faculty member I spoke with wanted students to better understand the demands of a liberal arts education. They also talked about some students who excel in this area. Some faculty members also stressed how important it is for the university to hire and retain professors who have had a liberal arts education themselves, and therefore understand its value. One stated that AUK has the potential to be the "Ivy League of the Middle East". Others touched on the issue of gender segregation and weighed its pros and cons in the classroom. While some argued that it benefited the classroom experience by eliminating the distractions caused by the presence of the opposite sex, others emphasized that it greatly restricted the degree to which a student could enjoy the liberal arts experience, in which ideas are shared from a diverse range of backgrounds and identities. My research on the issue revealed that the current enforcement of this law is a question of interpretation and that AUK has received more attention from the Parliament for being a liberal arts college and relatively new.

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

For the remainder of my internship, I worked as a teaching assistant for the only Spanish professor at the university. I attended two class periods and helped in giving presentations to students on grammar and culture in Spanish-speaking countries. I spent additional hours outside the classroom, tutoring students who needed extra help. This was a rewarding experience because I had the opportunity to get a feel for the classroom dynamics at AUK and also to understand some of the difficulties that native Arabic speakers have when trying to learn a foreign language like Spanish.

Interesting named bagala near apartment

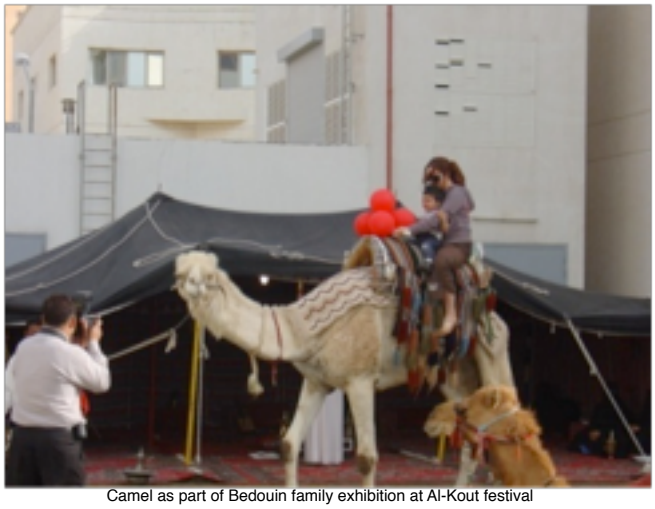
While a few students strived to learn the language, the majority of students found it difficult to engage totally in the course material. As a teaching assistant, I sometimes got frustrated with how much the students depended on my help to get through basic concepts. At the same time, I recognized that Spanish presents many difficulties to native Arabic speakers, particularly because the two languages use a different alphabet. For students in the beginning phase of learning Spanish, the verb conjugations presents challenges as well, and native Arabic speakers are no exception. The students who had the most success in the course were those who had grown up learning English or French in addition to Arabic.

What also presented an obstacle in the learning process for some students was the fact that the course was taught in English, for a class whose students were all native Arabic speakers. As a liberal arts institution based on the American model of higher education, all classes at AUK are taught in English. Many faculty members come from American university settings and are native English speakers with no contact with the Arabic language. Others come from different countries and speak another language such as French. Thus, to a degree, English serves as a middle language for teachers and students to be able to communicate. In my tutoring sessions I made sure to bridge the gap between Spanish and Arabic, by showing similarities in some grammatical structures between Arabic and Spanish or by translating from Spanish to Arabic, which helped make things clearer

LIVING IN KUWAIT

Although I had studied Arabic and taken courses that dealt with Middle Eastern cultures, they didn't prepare me for my experience in Kuwait and for the many nuances in its society that no scholarly book could teach. As an American entering a country in the Gulf for the first time, I looked forward to enjoying an "authentic" cultural experience and found myself, like anyone looking for such an experience, both disappointed and surprised not to find what I had expected: camels, deserts and anti-Americanism.

Mosque near AUK


Camel as part of Bedouin family exhibition at Al-Kout festival

Instead I found an overwhelming presence of American fast food franchises and innumerable malls and shopping centers. I was surprised also by the large number of Asians, particularly Filipinos and Indians, that, in addition to Arabs of different nationalities, form the majority of the population and the main labor force in the country. Visiting the houses of some of my Kuwaiti friends, it was also peculiar for me to see three or four people working as domestic laborers. During my time in Brazil as well as in Spain, I also observed similar practices in which families of the middle and upper class employ domestic service. Although initially I saw this work as a form of oppression, I soon realized that similar practices exist in the United Sates and that, to an extent, an individual chooses to do this kind of work. Moreover, all things considered, domestic work serves as a safer and sometimes more economically advantageous option than other forms of work available to immigrants.

Living in Kuwait I also perceived the importance of *wasta* as a common practice in social relations. In the workplace or among friends, I often heard phrases like "I need *wasta*" or "do you have *wasta*?" *Wasta*, which translates to English as connections, pulls or intermediary influence, is a form of networking in which one's close ties to people in positions of power can help him/her navigate the social system. Wasta can be used to escape a trivial legal situation, or on a larger scale, to earn a high political position. And it is not a practice unique to Kuwaitis--in fact, expatriates have also learned to practice *wasta.* In some instances, *wasta* has the potential to undermine the integrity of legal, governmental and educational institutions. A few professors at AUK complained about students who tried to use *wasta* for grade changes or second chances on exams. The social acceptability of *wasta* presents another challenge in AUK's success as a reputable and professional liberal arts institution. While at the beginning of my internship I considered *wasta* to be a sign of corruption and a social phenomenon unique to Kuwait, I took a step back and recognized that similar social practices exist in the U.S. (*networking*) as well as in Brazil (*o jeitinho brasileiro*).

My time in Kuwait was an incredible learning experience and I will carry the skills that I learned through my work at AUK to whatever professional career I enter. This experience has certainly encouraged me to continue studying Arabic and Arab culture, especially the cultural and societal nuances that textbooks fail to explain or show. When I speak or read Arabic now, words and phrases are no longer empty as they were when I studied from a book, but rather full of memories from when I spoke the language with my friends and coworkers. This experience has also fortunately replaced my U.S. media image of the Middle East with a personalized one, filled with the many friendships and work relationships that I formed during my time in Kuwait. This internship left a mark on my identity and changed how I perceive myself and the world. I can happily say that I am not the same person that I was when I first arrived.