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My Experience at the University of Dayton

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I. My Experience at the University of Dayton

Amal Alrasheed, Undergraduate Student, Department of Political Science; International Studies Program

“I am Amal. What is your name?” This “easy” phrase is what I used to say when I wanted to integrate within a new community back in Saudi Arabia. However, this phrase was the toughest phrase I could say out loud when I was a freshman at the University of Dayton. I faced a lot of challenges when I first came to UD. I was not prepared to handle the differences between my culture and the American culture. I wanted to be part of the UD community; however, people seemed uncomfortable whenever I opened a conversation. I had a tough time understanding why it was always awkward when I started a conversation with an American. I started to think that both Americans and I myself were uncomfortable having conversations because of the fact that I am a Muslim and Saudi, and because of the fact that I am different than anyone else here.

I felt isolated in my first semester at UD. I felt like an invisible human being in the classroom. I used to be very popular back in Saudi Arabia; I used to know many people. However, this changed when I came here. I hated the fact I was not a social person anymore, and I wanted to go back to Saudi Arabia where I can easily get involved within a community without facing any challenges. Although I thought of giving up, I did not give up this great opportunity. I decided to spend my freshman year observing the factors behind the whole “uncomfortable situation” between me and Americans.

I figured that the easiest way to understand Americans is to join student organizations and try hard to make friendships. Thus, I joined several UD student organizations, such as SJP and MSA; and I even joined a state-based organization, the Ohio Democratic Party. I got to know Naima, my BFF now! Naima and I have one thing in common: we both are Muslims. I felt very comfortable talking to her and she felt the same. She was one of the people who helped me better understand American culture.

One day I asked Naima, “What do you think I would look like if I opened up a conversation with a person I do not know?” She said, “That would be uncomfortable.” I asked her why and she told me, “This is what social life is like here. You only talk to people you know.” My conversation with Naima made me acknowledge that Americans did not feel uncomfortable

around me because I am different. In fact, it was because they were afraid that they would make me feel uncomfortable. Most Americans seem to know very little about my Saudi/Muslim culture, and I realized the fact I am wearing my *abyah* probably makes them think that there are red lines they should not cross.

When I realized that the “lack of cultural awareness” was the reason why I could not interact with my classmates in my first year, I started to take the initiative all the time. I started to improve my English so it would be easier for me and Americans to understand each other. Then I started to open up the conversations. And that worked. I made a lot of friendships and I had the chance to wipe out some of the stereotypes that Americans have in mind about Saudi/Muslim women. I love the fact that I met all the challenges I faced, and now I feel I understand American culture very well. However, I think the majority of Americans still have many wrong ideas about my culture—or they do not have any ideas at all.

If you made it to the end of this essay, I hope you keep in your mind one thing: **YOU SHOULD START THE INITIATIVE.** Try to start a conversation, try to ask questions, try to get the true information, and try to have more knowledge about other cultures. When you see an international person next to you in your classroom, speak to her/him. International students will always feel like outsiders at the beginning, so speak to them and try to get to know them and the culture they came from. Interacting with people who come from different cultures is always fun, and helpful. You might learn about things you had no idea even existed. The final thing I will ask you to do is this: when you see me anywhere on campus, please say “hi.” This is my last semester and I always wanted to feel comfortable saying “Hi! Good morning! Have a great day!” to people I do not know. This is what I used to do all the time back in Saudi Arabia, and this is what I always wanted to do at UD.

Amal's Presentation Slides



**What Does it Mean To be a Saudi
Woman in the US?**
Amal M. Alrasheed

Who am I?

- Amal M. Alrasheed (Hope)
- Riyadh, KSA
- Dual Major in POL and INS
 - with Con. In Peace and Global Security

- *The Presentation Outline*
 - Western view of Saudi Women
 - Short facts about Saudi Women,
 - My experience as a Saudi woman at UD

Women Employment

- About 99,000 Saudi women were employed in the private sector as recently as 2012, but that number rose to more than 159,000 by 2015, exceeding the rate of employment growth for males. *(Ministry of Labor and Social Development)*
- Raising female labor force participation to the 43 percent average of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members would lead – at current unemployment levels – to the admission of an additional 1.7 million women into the Saudi workforce. *(Ministry of Labor and Social Development)*
- Women since 2002 started to consider some sector jobs, high percentage of women enter other than “educational field”.



SOME Successful Saudi Women (who the media does not cover)

- **Thoraya Ahmed Obaid**
 - Executive Director of UNFPA, 2001
 - The First Saudi woman to receive a government scholarship to study at an American university in 1963
- **Khawla Al Khuraya**
 - Director of the Research Centre at King Fahad National Centre for Children's Cancer
 - A leader of genomic cancer research
 - Elected to Shura Council (Consultative Council)
- **Hayat Sindi**
 - First female woman from the Gulf to obtain a Ph.D in Biotechnology from Cambridge

My Experience at UD

- The Culture I came from:
 - Social, and Community-based
 - You are expected to talk to everyone, and anyone
 - Informal sittings
 - Argumentative (but very comfortable for sharing views)
 - Somehow open to other cultures, especially the western/US cultures (Hollywood :))
- The Culture I adapted to:
 - Self-oriented
 - You are more comfortable to talk to the people YOU KNEW
 - ("You will look weird" story)
 - Very formal sittings
 - THEY AVOID MISTAKES!
 - NOT very open to other cultures (especially mine)

