

Synopsis of Interview

Mark Bell

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Originally came to teach a freshman orientation to college learning course, and continues even now. He continues in this position, but is also now Director of Academic Services, handling the academic program side: academic affairs deals with students outside the classroom, but academic services for course related services, such as study abroad, advising, and other services.

Was a lecturer at main campus teaching the orientation course, now have lots of different responsibilities. Loves to deal with students, wanted a different kind of experience. Had promised to stay only a year, but now have been in Qatar for five year. Students are fun, enjoyable. Can broaden skill set in Qatar. Has the greatest job in the world, being a part of a great project.

Came to Texas A&M Qatar in August 2003, just a few people came before to find villas, just a few weeks before classes start. Taught 8am first day of class, scared to death. Passed out syllabus with left hand, was mortified, but found everyone to be very tolerant.

Found it surprising to find everyone in Arab dress after plane stopped in Bahrain. Academically, found that not very surprising. Freshman are freshman everywhere, not really different. There are adjustments to make: have blown some appliances up learning how the power works, no ESPN. Its western enough to be comfortable, but not too much; still has much the culture of the Middle East.

Early adjustments

Heat and humidity when getting off the plane, getting bags, bussed to villa in heavy traffic, couldn't get the phones to work, TV wouldn't work, couldn't cook anything. This was before things got setup so people are more comfortable. Would've happily gone home, but now very glad to have stayed, learned from the experience. Being in Qatar, had never really been away from wife of 15 years, very difficult. Had to work out communication streams to be able to stay in touch. Much easier now.

Early group was very much like a family, needed for support. Changes in the size of the organization really don't permit this strong sense of closeness. Every year has a different feel to it. Year 2 still small, close, some new people, Tissa Salter came wanted boys and girls to sit together. Some fundamental students really objected; one came early to class, not a member of class, to direct boys and girls where to sit – apart. Tissa and the student had to work out what was appropriate. Different issues came up. Staff would say to faculty "you don't seem like faculty." Almost all the faculty weren't tenure track from main campus. Year 3: Tenured faculty came, and again, had different expectations. That was a big growing pain, and when it started to feel like a real university instead of an experiment in the desert. Year 4: New Deans for academic affairs, Dean & CEO, helped settle things down. Year 5: another new academic affairs dean. Now a fully functioning undergraduate university.

Future growth

More undergraduates, graduate studies, research. More differentiation between groups and responsibilities, boundaries.

First Graduation, First Aggie Ring Ceremony lots of firsts last year. Aggie Rings are a defining experience, really makes it all come home.

First year, academic convocation, big opening day celebration, barbeque, Texas welcome. Huge opera, wearing business professional clothes in bleachers, at night, hot, sitting for three or four hours in Arabic, the highlight was a guy on a horse on fire – found out it wasn't supposed to happen. The fire was accidental. All the old guys who'd come in from Texas had fallen asleep from the jetlag and activity in the back rows.

Every now and again, accompanies a group of students going to main campus – able to see the campus through their eyes. Students from main campus who come to Qatar are likewise impressed. There are differences, but not people are well able to live with and tolerate.

Humor is a wonderful part of Arabic culture. Males and females both exhibit wonderful dry humor.

Important to share experiences, share laughter among people from different cultures, a wonderful lesson that people can co-exist.

Legacy

Sharing, serving students, being a part of the early group, helping to create the Academic Services Office.