

Interview with Dr. David B. Prior
March 19, 2008

When Bob Gates became President, asked to become Interim Provost, later made permanent.

Asked to come to Qatar to find out what the invitation was about. Previous visit, small group, but no decision. Assembled about 18 people to come to Qatar to find out what the vision for Education City was, how it would resonate with Texas A&M. Met Dr. Fathy Saoud.

Sheikha Mozah is quite remarkable, dedicated to education and social progression, increasing the role of women in society. Her vision would provide opportunity for students from all over the world, men and women to study. A place where high class education is provided, significantly to Qatari, other places in the Middle East and beyond.

95% of TAMU students (CS) are from Texas. Bob Gates remarked that for some of them, going to Oklahoma would be an international experience.

Benefit of a shared presence is a really good thing to do for the world. A different model of an international university where each of the partner institutions own their degree – they own the quality. Not just hired guns that come in and out for a few years, it's a long term commitment. Focus on quality was precious.

The first people on the ground

Deborah Wright (Finance?) never had been outside Texas, came to Qatar for the signing of the agreement. Bob Gates signed it in CS, Prior brought it to Qatar for a ceremony signing with Sheikha Mozah. Deborah got here, very excited, QF had an open house, large number of people showed up interested in learning about the programs. Dr. Fathy Saoud said, there's so much interested, you have to have someone here to answer. Deborah came back in two weeks, by herself, then Lallah Howard followed a bit later, to start everything off. Powerful combination of determination, resources, enthusiasm, Texas 'can do' attitude.

Asked Chuck Bowman, Mark Weichold, Emily Ashworth, and someone else ("Gang of Four") to come followup on details of the agreement. A lot of people worked very hard to get it going. Had to go to Coordinating Board to get permission, the Board of Regents. One of the concerns, that this could not be a drain on the State of Texas resources. Was able to convince them that it would not be the case. Showed the 60 Minutes segment.

Some difficulties. Meeting with Dr. Fathy Soaud. Wanted four engineering degrees, just teaching. Had to explain that TAMU is a research intensive university, and the whole combination of research, scholarship and teaching can't be taken apart. Recommended QF read The Carnegie Voyer report, reinventing undergraduate education. Laid the groundwork for understanding the importance of research in the whole process. "Teaching, research and service" Had to overcome the original idea of just coming to teach.

Importance of collaboration

With QF and QU. Dr. Sheikha was an active part of QF before becoming President of QU. Desire for TAMU to be collaborative, with QU, the industry, bridge programs, Rand corporation (active in reorganizing education under SM)

Never been to Middle East, as geologist, worked in Asia, many parts of the world. The warmth of the people is remarkable. Easy to make friends with these wonderful people. The warmth of the welcome stands out. Working out problems with Dr. Fathy Saoud, Dr. Hassna, Dr. Abdullah Al Thani. It's outstanding, their quiet generosity of spirit. The Emir's vision for the state as a whole, his ministers, people dedicated to moving Qatar forward, investing in infrastructure. Progressive state using resources in a wise manner. SM influences globally through UNESCO. Lots of incredibly interesting happenings.

Building a university from scratch, building programs away from the larger institution. Bob Gates is a guy with some vision as well – his world-wide experience was a steadying hand on all of it. His overall presence was very important.

Everyone here got excited about it. People would come to work on the project, and then go back excited. Balanced the skepticism on the main campus. UT, Austin turned down the opportunity and now may regret it. Bob Gates had four major targets for TAMU: under Vision 2020. Enhance the faculty, providing enhanced education (study abroad) for students, diversity of views, ideas and backgrounds, infrastructure. Qatar fit into the first three in major ways, and in a more abstract way, infrastructure. Galveston campus is separate, but connected. Some of the governance is the same, some of the ancillary services were similar (food service, admissions): bottom line – lot of experienced, dedicated people. Chuck Bowman's experience and stature. Fact is an awful lot of people worked to make it happen and enjoyed doing it. A&M is full a people who commit to quality, willing to learn.

Working with Dr. Fathy Saoud

There is no doubt about the man's passion. [We] have a bond that comes out of commitment, and works for us. Excitement of traveling around the world, having a job to do, sense of satisfaction about making progress: everything about it was exciting.

One of the concerns was how well the students would be able to handle this stuff. Decided to interview all applicants. Very bright young Qatari woman came in for her interview, asked do you like mathematics? If so, what? "Geometry, we started with planer geometry because that's easiest, Oh excuse me, easier." She corrected her own English, Very bright, very motivated, excited about coming to TAMUQ. [Prior] Very proud of the bright students.

One story: Group of students came to College Station, had a dinner for them at the country club. Someone asked Hessa, do you have any regrets – "Absolutely not." Hessa is Her Highness' niece, could go to school anywhere in the world, but choose TAMUQ. Proud to be an Aggie. Dinner was a disaster. Special beef was ordered and served, no steak knives at the table, but didn't matter, "you couldn't cut that beef with a chain saw."

Her Highness came to CS, [Prior] was showing her the campus from the top of Rudder Tower. Then they were going to come down, take a car to a meeting with students, but [Prior's] car didn't show up, [he] took off running, couldn't catch up. Finally walked in, Her Highness and all the students were there. Sheikha Mozah asked, "What happened to you?" "My car didn't show up" "Well, you could've come with me."

Proud of lots of things

The effort, the people who come to work here, the sense of adventure, solve the many problems and deliver the program, the students who work. Asia and Hessa graduated in four and a bit years. The rest graduate in May, just five years. Retention rate is very high. Graduation in four 75% graduation rate in five years. Extraordinary. UT, Austin and TAMUQ are about the same about 78% for 6 year graduation. Student: faculty ratio is

lower. Proud of the quality that is there. Starting to look at accreditation. Students are doing very well. Proud of our people being good citizens.

Conversation about mission creep. Taking on things not originally planned. Good citizens working with the other programs, having good relationships in other EC programs. The best of Aggie traditions are here. We look for honor and integrity in our students, and we have it here. Students from CS and Qatar mix well. Proud of the building: functionally good, but also beautiful.

The architect, very famous, club in Mexico City. Favorite color is burnt orange. UT, Austin's color. The first design has burnt orange all over the place. Can you imagine the Aggie's having this color? Had to have a conversation with QF "Can we do something about this color?" Lot of people worked hard laying out the plans. We were blessed that the head guy of the construction company was an Aggie, in charge of construction. On visits, would walk around, got his degree in architecture. He was very helpful, especially about that burnt orange.

What's important

Eleven years at TAMU, five years working with Bob Gates were the best of my professional career. To both of us, we set some stretch goals (hiring 450 new faculty, setting up the new campus, other goals) Important to catch this energy in the Gates leadership. We grasped the challenge and made it work. TAMU values are important. Having those values in Qatar is important, and it's successful.

Caught the wind of Sheika Mozah's vision. Did this properly, haven't regarded this as a money opportunity. Regarded the resources as a means to get it done.

When I stop coming, I'll miss it. Will miss the excitement. Several years down the road, still so much to do. Still hiring faculty and staff, still maximizing the use of the building. Looking at starting up graduate programs. The same degree of challenge and excitement and opportunity are still there.

Natural evolution ahead, not just growing in size, adding graduate programs and research will take it to the true research model. Need to follow that evolution. The place is attracting attention, starting to use EC and TAMU as the model. People visit and ask "How did that work?"

Trend in education to go global – not always successful. Greater development of international efforts in the past ten years, but there's beginning to be a bit of caution about getting engaged in international ventures. EC/TAMU model works, the relationship with QF: represents the will of the people, not a money making venture. Its unique in how its put together. Lots of success factors: having adequate resources, people working hard, having the right relationships.

From an idea to a reality, from a hope to an achievement, from freshman to graduates, from Qatari based to over 1000 students applying from all over the world, greater understanding between people, attitudes changing, an awareness of the deep and long-lived contributions of Arabic culture.

The gift to Sheikha Mozah at the opening of the engineering building

Wanted to model on an ancient astrological instrument, thought of making a very large one, the Greeks invented them, but the Arabs made them sophisticated. Everyone gave a negative response. Started talking with Mark Weichold, digging down, asked the Dean of

Architecture, John Regan put Rodney Hill onto it. Memorial Student Center at main campus has wood carving pictures, very large, detailed, done by Rodney Hill [from Architecture]. Came up with this gift is a 16 foot high sculpture, an obelisk, typical of Arab culture, around the bottom carvings of oysters, then a show, then an LNG tanker, a panel with early Arab medical instruments, an astrolabe, engineering equations in Arabic, panels with Arab script, four sided, one manifestation of Arab culture set in Qatar. Then will be mounted permanently in the foyer of the building as TAMU gift to the people of Qatar recognizing the contributions of Arab culture to history and science. Given to Her Highness at the opening ceremony [of the engineering building.]

Has been passionate about the project, one of the things enjoyed most in professional career, but mostly “it’s been people: about people, by people, for people” and its been a great experience