

Palestinian student making the most of his American education

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University Park, Pa. - Issam Khoury, a Penn State international graduate student studying higher education, will one day incorporate what he has learned about the academic system in the United States and use it while working at a university in the Middle East.

As an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech majoring in political science, then a master's degree graduate student in Arabic literature at Ohio State, Khoury learned the value of the universities' programs for multicultural students. The guidance, support and advice received from his mentors in these programs were priceless. He wanted to have that kind of impact on other students' lives. That's when he resolved to stay in academia professionally. While he looked at a variety of universities for his doctoral degree, Khoury chose Penn State for its reputation.

"Penn State's higher education program prepares you very well," he said. "The faculty have a broad and deep understanding of issues in higher education and they are truly exceptional."

Khoury, a Palestinian born in Kuwait and raised there and in Cyprus, is working on numerous degrees while he's here: a master's degree in international affairs and a dual-title doctorate in higher education and comparative international affairs. He hopes the education he has received in the United States will help him make a difference at a university closer to family and friends. His ultimate goal is to one day be president of a university in the Middle East. With that in mind, he's striving to work in various higher education fields.

Khoury has worked previously in the student affairs arena of higher education and is now focusing on academic affairs to broaden his experience. This summer he worked at Qatar University, Qatar's most prominent national institution of higher education, in the office of the vice president of academic affairs. Khoury explained that globalization has prompted universities around the world to move toward adopting standards accepted in Europe and the United States. His internship work included examining Qatar University's core curricular program,

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which is only four years old, and helping to evaluate this program against other universities throughout the world. His work there also helped with research he is doing with Beverly Lindsay, a Penn State higher education professor who is his doctoral adviser.

Lindsay, who is working on an internationally funded project called "Universities and Global Diversity: Preparing Educators for Tomorrow," has had a major impact on Khoury's education. Her project's focus is to help all major areas of the world, especially those in the Middle East and Gulf States that are often overlooked, in scholarly and administrative literature. Khoury is assisting her with her research, and the knowledge from his internship, which Lindsay helped him obtain through a funded grant she initiated, benefits that research. His experiences at Qatar University were invaluable, Lindsay said, explaining that Khoury's internship allowed him to analyze universities in both America and Qatar. He was able to understand how the two countries' schools could function effectively with their own styles, while still preparing a range of professionals for a globally diverse community.

"The practicum/internship provided a realistic portrait of what Issam is likely to face as he assumes a professional position in a Middle Eastern university after he obtains his Ph.D.," she said. "Having exposure to the latest American and Middle Eastern/Gulf states' higher education conditions will facilitate his transition and movement among global regions."

While working in Qatar last summer, Khoury returned to Kuwait for the first time in 19 years. He was 13 in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. His family was vacationing in Cyprus at the time and learned they could not go home -- for their belongings, to attend school or to say goodbye to family and friends. Cyprus, a country with an open immigration policy and thus a destination for many refugees, became the Khourys' new home.

"Things have grown exponentially -- since 1990 everything has drastically changed," Khoury said. "It was very weird to see where I grew up."

Surprised by how busy and urban his neighborhood had become, Khoury plans to return to the Middle East when he completes his education at Penn State. According to Lindsay, Khoury is on the right track to attain his life goals.

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Since his return from Qatar, she said he is focusing even more intently on international higher education issues, polishing their co-authored chapter for her next book and sharing highlights with peers and faculty. He is also finalizing his dissertation topic and initial proposal that will focus on Qatar and other Gulf universities.

While Khoury said he has had many great experiences while working and studying in America, he would prefer to take home what he has learned and share it with Middle Eastern people. He has already seen the value of the work ethic he has gained here, particularly while interning in Qatar.

"Americans are very collegial. My experience here has shown me that supervisors and colleagues should be very supportive," he said. "I took that with me. I knew how to balance being serious and being funny. It's a better work environment when you can have both at the appropriate times."

He also said the way Americans adhere to deadlines impressed his supervisor in Qatar. Khoury met his deadlines every time, a good habit he learned in the United States.

Lindsay, who knows Khoury might be happier studying and working closer to home, also knows he's putting aside what he might want now, for a better future.

"There is an adage that 'one who only works or lives in one country is like reading only one chapter of a book,' " Lindsay said. "Issam wants to read that book and numerous others."

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