
Challenges of Introducing Liberal Arts Education for Women in the Middle East

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In the summer of 1999, Her Royal Highness Princess Lolowah al-Faisal asked me to help start a college for women in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Princess Lolowah's vision for what she wanted to achieve in the women's college had been shaped during a visit to the United States, where she was fascinated to observe hands-on teaching in the sciences and to learn about undergraduate student internships at both Smith and Mt. Holyoke Colleges. She brought these ideas back to the women's college she was charged with starting in honor of her mother, Effat al-Thunayan Al-Saud, the widow of King Faisal. Effat College—now Effat University—was inaugurated on September 8, 1999 with eight teachers and thirty-seven students, married and single, from ages seventeen through thirty. Our goal was to open the college by the end of the summer before Queen Effat passed away, and we succeeded in that.

This essay discusses what it has meant to introduce liberal arts education abroad, at a time when liberal arts education is under fire in the United States for not providing career-specific education and for being too expensive for what it offers students. This essay focuses particularly on the challenges of establishing liberal arts education for women, as well as the difficulties faced when working in Islamic contexts and transferring knowledge and

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technology. Specifically, it addresses challenges faced in six areas: financing; academic freedom and curriculum; government relations; student body and student life; staffing; and cultural factors. It concludes by providing key lessons learned.

THE LIBERAL ARTS MODEL

Placing these experiences in the larger international context, we can see that they are but one part of the explosion in the demand for higher education and the consequent growth of universities throughout the Middle East and Asia over the last twenty-five years. Within the Middle East, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia were latecomers to higher education. Saudi Arabia's first universities opened in the 1960s and 1970s, and only with the bursting of the oil bubble in the 1990s were licenses made available to groups and individuals to start private, non-profit universities. In Saudi Arabia it was Queen Effat, who had dreamed for years of starting a university for women, who received the first license.

Before considering the issues of transferring the liberal arts model to another culture, it is important to understand what the model entails. Jonathan Becker, the Vice President of Bard College who has worked to establish the liberal arts in Russia and Eastern Europe, offers the following definition:

Modern liberal arts education is a system of higher education designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens. It is distinguished by a flexible curriculum that allows for student choice and demands breadth, as well as depth of study, and by a student-centered pedagogy that is interactive and requires students to engage directly with critical texts within and outside of the classroom.¹

As contrasted with European models of higher education—where students enter directly into professional studies or a major and may lose years if they want to switch fields—the liberal arts model offers students a choice. Students may go to university not knowing in what they want to major. The liberal arts curriculum offers them a chance to explore new fields and to find a discipline that resonates with them.

What becomes clear in building these new institutions is that the liberal arts educational model is a complex system made up not only of varied curriculum and interactive and participatory pedagogies, but also of an administrative structure, a system of governance, and the organization

of the whole range of activities subsumed within student life, including career services.² While this system is not limited to small American liberal arts colleges, such American colleges provide a compelling model with their campus cultures and emphasis on ethical values, the arts, community, and social engagement. When it comes to transferability to another culture, this model requires adjustment and extensive explanation for the benefit of the local populace. Adapting the ideas of the liberal arts to different cultures results in learning and change in both the recipients and the change agents.

FINANCING

Starting a university is a capital-intensive activity. The new universities in the Middle East and South Asia have been funded by governments, rulers, royal families, wealthy industrialists, religious leaders, and foreign institutions. Some have been unsuccessful—most often those in which a foreign institution entered into an agreement to create a branch campus with the idea of making a profit for the home school. Many of the government-initiated schools have suffered from bureaucratic problems and stultifying pedagogies including rote education, or emphasizing memorization and repetition which is common throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Among new universities, the Ashesi University in Ghana is an exception as a private, non-profit liberal arts-based university, in that it was started by an individual and funded by colleagues and supporters. Another exception to large-scale funding is the Asian Women's Leadership University in Penang, Malaysia, which is being created by a group of Smith College alumnae and modeled on their alma mater. On the whole, however, people with very deep pockets are funding private, non-profit universities.

Although there is a history of successful institutions with undergraduate liberal arts programs in the Middle East,³ this new generation of universities is different in that the initiative to fund and found these universities has come from within the countries themselves. The ruler of the emirate of Sharjah, Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qasimi, founded the American University of Sharjah—arguably the most successful of the new universities in the region despite recent press coverage of the suppression of political speech.⁴ The University is now self-supporting with 5,000 students. It also has the finest library in the region, with a model information commons that is the center of campus activity. Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco is another liberal arts university in the region that is also thriving. Funded by the Kings of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, and clearly based on the American

liberal arts college model, it began in 1995 at the suggestion of the King of Morocco, who matched the money given by the King of Saudi Arabia to clean up an oil spill.⁵

CURRICULA AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In their curricula, these new universities are part of the globalization of higher education.⁶ They are all schools that use English as the medium of instruction. Many of them strive to get accreditation from one or another of the American regional accrediting bodies. As a result their curricula, their organization of academic life, and their individual courses are at a standard acceptable to American accrediting agencies. Yet, given the financing of these new universities, questions about the degree of academic freedom within them are valid. Moreover, often the more popular majors offered—

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business, computer science, and engineering—are career-oriented and may not lead to discussion of political and social issues in class. Nonetheless, demand dictates that these institutions teach in new ways and emphasize “critical thinking” as opposed to rote learning. It is the liberal arts core that gives students different frameworks and teaches them to ask questions.

Effat College began with Princess Lolowah’s quest for new pedagogies that would reach students who were not succeeding in Saudi high schools and would help them develop self-motivation to learn. From the beginning she was also concerned about creating more space for careers for women and for Effat graduates, and wanted career preparation through internships to be woven into the curriculum. So, the curriculum of the nascent Effat College was concerned with empowering women while addressing the pre-existing needs of Saudi Arabia at that time. In the strict sense of the phrase, Effat University as it has developed—with its schools of engineering, architecture, business, and the humanities—is not a liberal arts institution. Yet, these fields are new frontiers for women in the Kingdom, and they are being offered with a core curriculum that gives students a broad educational base.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

In addition to financing and construction of a curriculum, the foundation of a liberal arts university must also be concerned with the relationships with the government, most often in the form of the Ministry of Higher Education. This Ministry is usually responsible for the state-run universities, and a liberal arts curriculum may be in conflict with its curriculum requirements. In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry grants the licenses for private universities and has stringent requirements for curriculum, based in part on a strong suspicion of private higher education.

Students in Saudi Arabia are streamed into the sciences and mathematics or into the humanities before high school, and the Ministry does not allow students to cross from one stream to another. At Effat College, we immediately ran into trouble by requiring that all of our students take a biology course, which included laboratory work. We also encountered difficulties in the number of courses that the Ministry required for each major. Overcoming these challenges required creative negotiation of equivalencies between Effat’s American-designed major courses and groupings of the Ministry’s requirements.

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When I was starting at Effat, one of my Saudi advisors was Dr. Haifa Jamal al-Lail, who has since become the president of the University.⁷ Dr. Jamal al-Lail alerted me to the linguistic problems of using liberal arts vocabulary. In 1999, we could not use the words “liberal” or “arts” in Saudi Arabia in discussing the curriculum, nor could we talk about “philosophy.” The fact that today Effat offers courses in art in the architecture program, and that students study philosophy, indicates a measure of change in the Kingdom. In a ground-breaking development, Effat has also opened a school of engineering for women in collaboration with Duke University.

STUDENT BODY AND STUDENT LIFE

Initially, it was not easy to attract students to Effat College. In its first year, the college admitted all thirty-seven students who applied, of whom one-third were of foreign nationality but born in Saudi Arabia. The college since

has maintained this proportion. Because children born of non-Saudi parents working as foreign workers in Saudi Arabia do not receive Saudi nationality, Effat and other private universities offer an opportunity to this population to gain a university education. Therefore, these non-Saudi nationals needed financial aid in order to attend. Moreover, initially the decision to attend Effat involved a major financial decision for Saudi women, because their education would otherwise be free and they would receive a stipend of approximately \$300 per month if admitted to the state university. However, the King has recently announced that students' tuition will be paid at the private, non-profit universities in addition to the government institutions. Over the years, the quality of Effat education has attracted highly-motivated students and the total student body is now well over 1,000 students.

In 1999, when the thirty-seven students arrived at the college, not one had read a book the previous summer. Most had come through traditional Saudi high school education. When the Early Childhood Education professor tried to use informal methods of discussion asking each student to say what they liked, only one shyly said, "world peace." The professor shocked the students by saying that she asked for their opinions because she wanted to know what they thought. "I like green tea," she answered, "and chocolate." Four years later, the transformation of these students was remarkable at the first graduation. They had new confidence and were only too ready to give their opinions.

Early in our discussion with the Princess, we could see that creating a program of co-curricular activities was essential to giving the students

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new skills and the dimensions of a real college education. When we learned that young Saudi women had not had sports or exercise during their high school education except at a couple of elite schools, we decided to make Physical Education mandatory. At first, the requirement elicited a negative reaction, but soon the students enjoyed basketball and gym classes. By the second semester all but one signed up for more sports. One noticeable impact on the school's culture was that students stopped wearing formal clothing under

their abayas, and came to school in gym shoes, jeans, and tee-shirts, looking like university students anywhere in the world. The requirement helped to

give the college a bluestocking reputation for academic focus. There were no other university teams to challenge in basketball during the first year, so the students played the British and Saudi Airlines high schools. Since then, there has been a ripple effect in college sports for women, and Effat women now compete in swimming, track, basketball, and volleyball with students from the public and private universities in Jeddah.

The development of student co-curricular activities also involved breaking new social ground. We held the first open house for the college after a Kuwaiti consultant had suggested that we do a telethon with all students, staff, and faculty, calling everyone who had contacted the college. This effort resulted in a turnout of over 120 women coming for the tours and presentations given by students and faculty about the college.

Over the years, under the leadership of Dr. Jamal al-Lail, campus life has continued to evolve and become rooted in the needs of both the university and Saudi culture. This has included the formation of student government. During a recent trip to Jeddah, I witnessed a training program about running student government attended by both young women and young men from private Saudi colleges. It was thrilling to see the self-confident Effat University Student Government President tell the group, “at Effat University, this is how we organize elections.”

STAFFING

Since Effat College was started over a period of weeks, the model of the college came out of my personal experiences as a graduate of Swarthmore College and former professor at Oberlin College. In order to achieve the vision shared with Princess Lolowah in such a short timeframe, it was important to hire faculty and staff who had experience in the liberal arts. The first American staff member hired was also a Swarthmore graduate, which meant that it was not necessary to explain basic concepts such as curriculum, credits, registration, and a balance of academic and social life.

One of the greatest challenges in starting the college was staffing, in part because of the requirement to hire only females. We hired both Arab women from the region and women from the West, with the former group having more trouble in adjusting. It might be thought that it would be easier for Arab women from the region to adapt to Saudi Arabia: they spoke Arabic and they were Muslim. But they also came with feelings of cultural superiority, resentment about being told how to be a Muslim, and financial needs that created intercultural problems. In fact, it surprised me that the women we hired from the Commonwealth and North America had an easier

time adjusting. The staffing challenges we faced were also partly due to our time constraint in starting. We needed to create a system of human resource management, but were hiring people before that was set up. Fortunately, we found an American Human Resources specialist who developed a system that treated applicants and employees equally and created a sense of support for all of the staff. After the College was established we learned that Saudi law required that the head of Human Resources must be Saudi, although by that time the system was already in place.

The segregation of sexes in Saudi Arabia posed an additional challenge. No men could enter the campus while students were at the school. The buildings were constructed in such a way that men could perform repairs to the overhead air conditioning system without walking on the campus. Along the campus wall, we constructed two special rooms: one for meetings with fathers, and the other as a closed circuit television studio where male professors could give their lectures that would then be circulated via screens in the classrooms. Under these conditions, I did not hire male professors. More recently, Dr. Jamal al-Lail, who understands how to promote the growth of Effat University given local norms, has hired male professors for the new business, architecture, and engineering programs. Effat now uses a protocol to contact parents for permission for their daughters to take classes taught by male professors. Students are required to wear headscarves and abayas in class with the men, so that the university is not perceived as breaking any cultural rules. These new male professors now have offices within the departments and participate fully in faculty meetings.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By starting Effat College quickly we did not have the advantage of planning, but were creating our model as we moved forward. This worked only because there was sufficient financing for the project. Even so, by the second year it was important to create a financial plan to sustain the College. In addition to finances, there was another key factor that allowed us to create a Saudi women's university with a liberal arts base in that short period of time: a common vision. We hired women who shared that vision.

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In thinking about what we

learned from translating the liberal arts model to another culture, I would make certain recommendations:

- First, have one model and one mission, and make sure that the first people hired understand and subscribe to both.
- Second, it is important to start a new university on a small scale and to learn from experience.⁸ Although we made mistakes, Effat is continuing to thrive and has a positive campus culture that is very Saudi. In fact, the culture at Effat probably developed during that first year of experimentation. While the curriculum is now more technical, the core courses of the university come from the liberal arts.
- Third, you cannot start unless you have a certain level of financing so that you can give staff sufficient incentives.
- Fourth, the development of campus life requires talented and committed staff. This is an integral part of the liberal arts experience, and without a thoughtful Dean of Students and a willingness to work with students to develop activities, a lot of the new learning will be lost.
- Fifth, as a university grows, the need to communicate about the goals and mission of the university to all faculty, staff, and students and to develop a set of shared institutional values becomes increasingly important.
- Last, and perhaps most important, the identification of talented leadership from within the country is necessary to shape a vision for the university that is both consonant with its culture and sees larger possibilities beyond present realities. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jonathan Becker, "What a Liberal Arts Education is...and is Not," Modification of a talk of the same title given at the Open Society Institute's Undergraduate Exchange Program Alumni Conference in Budapest, Hungary, June 2003, available in: *Bard Essays*, Bard Institute for International Liberal Education; iile.bard.edu/lib/db_essays.php?action=getfile&id=39897347, 3.
- 2 See Jonathan Becker's discussion of the problems of transferring ideas of the liberal arts system to on-going Russian and Eastern European universities, *ibid.*
- 3 These especially include the American University of Beirut, founded in 1866, and the American University of Cairo, founded in 1919.
- 4 Khaled Fahmy, "Why I Didn't Go to Dubai," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, online edition, March 6, 2013; <http://chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/why-i-didnt-go-to-dubai/31935>.
- 5 The Saudi King had given Morocco money to clean up an anticipated oil spill on the beaches of Morocco, after a Saudi tanker broke up in the Atlantic. In the actual event, the winds changed and the oil did not wash on shore. It was the Moroccan King's suggestion that he match the Saudi money and that they build a new university named after the two kings.

- 6 Phillip Altbach, "Introduction," *Leadership for World Class Universities, Challenges for Developing Countries*, (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 7 Dr. Haifa Jamal al-Lail was Dean of the Women's Section of King Abdul Aziz University before Effat, and is a serious scholar and university administrator. With a doctorate in public policy from the University of Southern California, Dr. Jamal al-Lail has developed a vision for Effat University and has been extremely creative in bringing acceptable change and connecting the university with partners around the world.
- 8 Ashesi University started with thirty students in one bungalow in Accra, but has now constructed its campus on a hillside above the city. It has already made a strong reputation for itself for its academic quality and its insistence on an Honor Code, unique in institutions in Africa. This contrasts with the experience of planning the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for Aga Khan University for four and one half years and having to put the project on hold for security and political reasons.