

Students embrace Arabic in new International Learning Community

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Arabic script runs along the dormitory hall of the third floor in Adams Hall. To an outsider it looks like an intricate design flowing among the plaster, but to the residents it provides direction and introductions to their fellow floormates.

This is Baytunaa, the Arabic floor in the International Learning Community (ILC). Baytunaa, meaning “our home,” houses five undergraduate students dedicated to speaking Arabic and learning about the different Arabic-speaking countries and cultures.

Baytunaa really does feel like a cozy little home. Students receive special Arabic instruction outside of their daily classes while sitting in overstuffed comfy chairs in front of the fireplace.

Sadam Issa, a Jordan native is the language floor coordinator.

“I have students of all levels learning and practicing standard Arabic, the Arabic used in modern journalism, legal systems and other formalities in Arabic-speaking countries,” says Issa. “It’s the language people use when speaking to someone of another Arabic dialect.”

Residents of Baytunaa meet with Issa three times a week to watch movies, play games and converse in Arabic. These meetings enhance speaking and writing skills while provid-



Cristina Trevino-Murphy reads from a selection of Arabic text during professor Dustin Cowell’s class session as part of the International Learning Community (ILC) Arabic floor study program in Adams Hall.

ing cultural knowledge of the Arabic world. This is all part of a one-credit Integrated Liberal Studies course all ILC students are required to take. It provides heightened cross-cultural understanding.

“ILC is one of the many ways in which UW-Madison prepares its students for an increasingly interdependent world,” says Gilles Bousquet, dean of the Division of International Studies. “It’s global competence training at its best.”

“I feel motivated to speak and learn more Arabic living here in Baytunaa,” says Cristina Treviño-Murphy, a freshman resident studying sociology. “It’s so much easier to find the resources to practice Spanish or French, but not Arabic. I have so many resources for practicing that are almost impossible for people to find. I can speak Arabic with people living on my floor and get help from a native speaker — Sadam.”

Baytunaa residents and all other ILC residents have the greatest resource of all — a fluent speaker in their language of study living on their floor.

“I have students in my room all the time asking questions about Jordan or wanting help with their homework,” says Issa. “They’re good students, they want to be here, and they want to learn.”

Baytunaa not only provides the necessary and hard-to-find resources for students, but it also prepares them for their futures.

“My experience here learning Arabic and living in Baytunaa has provided and continues to provide me with so many different perspectives,” says sophomore Michael Goldstein. “In order to learn and speak Arabic you have to apply a whole new way of thinking, it’s incredibly challenging, but very rewarding.”

The residents of ILC have a unique opportunity to live in a cross-cultured environment. Every floor has its own language and identity specific to those countries where the language is spoken.

“The ILC is a place where people speak five to six differ-



Student Michael Goldstein studies in his residence hall room in Adams Hall. The Arabic floor program focuses on teaching students the Arabic language through an immersive learning environment that includes not only Arabic-based classes, but also a living environment designed to surround the students with Arabic in their everyday lives.

ent languages and have been to so many different places, all of these details and backgrounds create for an amazing environment that you can’t get anywhere else,” says Treviño-Murphy.

All ILC residents are encouraged to share their views and ideas with one another at bimonthly roundtable dinners, creating a little global community of knowledge and insight. □

Revived School of Human Ecology center makes a name for retail

By Kristin Czubkowski
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About three years ago, a group of alumni debating the revival of the School of Human Ecology’s Center for Retailing Excellence asked many retail companies what their opinions were on the school’s graduates. The overwhelming answer: “We don’t know.”

One executive, though, the CEO of Kohl’s Department Stores, said he would get back to them.

“He did a little research, and called back and said, ‘Well, we hire more from UW, they stay longer and they promote faster. We like it a lot. What can we do to help it be better?’” says Jerry O’Brien, the center’s director. Using a seed grant of \$200,000 from Kohl’s, along with other prominent sponsors such as Target and Shopko, O’Brien was hired to reinvigorate the center, which had become less active over time due to funding issues.

Besides making a name for UW-Madison students among retail companies, another main objective for the center is promoting retail as a career path for all types of students — from history to retail to pharmacy majors — and dispelling myths about working in retail. Myths such as low pay and

long hours are untrue, O’Brien says.

“Our goal with the students is to introduce them to the wide variety of careers that the industry offers. Most students are aware that you can be a buyer or a store manager, but there’s so much more to it than that,” he says.

While many companies contribute financially to the center, which operates without state funding, they also are involved personally with students through networking or career-related events, a lecture series, a symposium class that features a weekly speaker and by hiring interns. Students can intern nationally at major corporations such as Macy’s, which is headquartered in New York, regionally at companies such as Kohl’s and Land’s End, and locally at stores such as The Purple Goose, a Verona-based women’s and children’s clothing store.

Halley Jones, owner of The Purple Goose, says she began hiring UW-Madison student interns as soon as she opened her store in October 2005 — even before the Center for Retailing Excellence had been revived.

“I just love interns,” she says. “They just bring this energy because they’re here to learn. Things change all the time in retail, and they’re really excited about different ideas that we come up with together and trying different things.”

When O’Brien first contacted Jones to become involved in the center, she took him up on his offer, agreeing to speak at one of the symposium’s class meetings. She says she enjoys being involved because she can offer a unique perspective to students as a smaller, more localized retailer.

Students seeking jobs and internships also benefit from the center’s close relationship with upper-level management at many larger companies. Amy Katschnig, a UW-Madison retail major and president of the Retail Club, says she was having trouble looking for an internship in the fall of 2006. She would apply online, but often would not hear from companies or get past an initial interview. During a trip to Chicago organized by the center, she met contacts for the American Girl Co. and Crate and Barrel, and was eventually offered internships at each. Beyond the trip, she adds, the events orchestrated by the center and the Retail Club help students ease into networking with retail employers.

“We all know ... that networking is so important, but it’s really intimidating to go to someone in this company because you think they have all the power in the world, and you’re just a student here who doesn’t know that much,” she says. “So I think that the small events and just keep encourag-

ing students to network — it breaks down some of that intimidation factor, so that really helps.”

Although getting funding and helping students and companies connect has been the center’s initial focus, School of Human Ecology Dean Robin Douthitt says the next step is focusing on research. One of the biggest advantages of UW-Madison that the alumni task force noted is its strong graduate schools and research tradition, she says. Developing research projects with specific companies can create a mutually beneficial relationship by improving a retailer’s business while allowing graduate students to work with real data and issues in retail.

O’Brien adds that a grant from the Kauffman Foundation is also allowing the center to discuss creating a separate symposium for privately owned, smaller retailers to discuss starting their own businesses. Another project involves linking together alumni to form a contact database among retailers.

“It’s very exciting. The truth of the matter is, the hardest thing is prioritizing where we should go next,” he says. “We want to do what we do well, then go on.” □