

Successful Omani student program with UWO expected to grow

by Alex Hummel - Friday, July 22, 2011

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As a carton of celebratory ice cream chilled on a table in the lower level of Taylor Hall on a steamy July 20 afternoon, a short ceremony of parting pleasantries ensued. Drew Kopitzke got up to say a few words.

The assistant residence hall director with the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Gruenhagen Conference Center reflected on his first meeting with the contingent of visiting students and staff from University of Nizwa in Oman. Kopitzke shared how, amid the formal welcomes and handshakes upon the group's early July arrival at UW Oshkosh, he found himself at a loss for words as a student pointed out his resemblance to a brawny, professional wrestler.

"He said, 'Man, you look like John Cena,'" Kopitzke said, triggering a small eruption of laughter at the farewell gathering.

Chances are John Cena's Arabic isn't as sharp as Drew Kopitzke's. The latter's elegant mastery of a few basic phrases was just one of the cross-cultural bonuses that came courtesy of "Global Horizons." Seven-year-old University of Nizwa developed its academic and cultural immersion program to bring Omani students to UW Oshkosh for the first time in the two institutions' long relationship.

"I hope I can be as good an ambassador for America as you have been (for Oman) here," Kopitzke said, promising his guests he'd reciprocate their kindness upon a future visit to their country.

Twelve students and three academic staff members from University of Nizwa concluded their four-week program at UW Oshkosh on July 21. The program featured UW Oshkosh-facilitated studies in business, accounting and marketing, opportunities to see the backstage nuances of regional agricultural and manufacturing operations and excursions to all-American staples such as baseball games.

Dr. Abdallah Omezzine, dean of the College of Economics, Management and Information Systems and acting vice president for Graduate Studies, Research & International Relations at the University of Nizwa, joined the students on their last couple of days at UW Oshkosh.

Omezzine said his 7,000-student university's growth and the success of the Global Horizons' collaboration with UW Oshkosh will assuredly bring more students the campus's way in years to come.

"This has given us motivation with our partners here to plan for next year," Omezzine said.

Separated by thousands of miles, the two universities long-lasting relationship quickly formed in the mid-1990s when then-UW Oshkosh Chancellor John Kerrigan served as a U.S. higher-education consultant for the Sultanate of Oman. From Kerrigan's visits, conversations developed about the development a university in Nizwa, Oman. Discussions between UW Oshkosh faculty and Omani counterparts continued and evolved into full-fledged development plans. With funding and governmental

support, University of Nizwa opened in 2004, and a permanent, entirely new campus is now being constructed about five miles outside of the city.

In the seven years University of Nizwa has existed, its enrollment has ballooned to 7,000 students, on pace to surpass 10,000 when the new campus is to open in the next couple of years.

The relationship between the two institutions has given UW Oshkosh faculty and staff opportunities to travel to the country on the tip of the Arabian peninsula and help develop organizational and academic strategic plans and curricula at University of Nizwa. This year, the relationship fostered the first trip by Omani students to UW Oshkosh.

“We told (the students) America is not something you see on TV or in the movies,” Omezzine said, emphasizing the value of getting students more deeply immersed in Midwest American culture.

He said students were advised that the often overwhelming environments of major U.S. cities “may not be as informative about the American lifestyle.”

Conversely, UW Oshkosh faculty, staff and students benefited from the opportunity to directly learn from student ambassadors from a part the Middle East that may not regularly receive international spotlight, especially in a year dominated by images and headlines chronicling political upheaval in other nations around the region.

Omezzine said there were some calls this year for social and economic reforms in Oman. The mutual reverence between its Sultan and citizens led to swift 21st Century change from leaders, but not at the expense of the country’s treasured heritage.

“Oman is really blessed with a leader who has a vision for Oman, who has a purpose for the country and a vision for the future being the modernization and a preservation of the culture,” he said.

Global Horizon’s UW Oshkosh hosts said that appreciation of modernity and tradition was manifest in the campus’s student guests.

“Every day seeing you as students has been a ray of sunshine,” said Marc Nysten, Director of Gruenhagen Conference Center, concluding the July 20 good-bye ice cream social.

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