



A business student reads in a mosque on the UAEU's Al Ain campus.

Middle East Meets West

UAEU's business school works to bridge a wide cultural divide.

Perhaps not too long ago, it would have been rare to see a business student studying in the shadow of a campus mosque. It would have been uncommon to visit a business school that worked its courses on Western business practices around daily synchronized calls for Muslim prayer. And it would have been unheard of to discuss management education with the American-born dean of a Middle Eastern business school.

Today, however, much has changed as the Middle East and West reach a better mutual understanding, says David Graf, the new dean of the United Arab Emirates University's College of Business and Economics (CBE) in Al Ain. In large part, business is driving that understanding.

"Dubai and Abu Dhabi have become financial and tourism centers, and the UAE has become a center of commerce," Graf says. He adds that, as multinational companies seek management training for their new hires, the university must

work to bridge the cultural divide between the Middle East and West.

To help position the region for its expanded role in the global economy, the CBE has had to make critical changes, says Graf. The school has transitioned from an Egyptian administrative model, characterized by layers of bureaucracy, to a Western administrative model, characterized by a democratic, decentralized power structure. It also achieved initial AACSB accreditation in 2000, becoming the first business school in the region to do so.

The CBE must also work to dispel the many misconceptions that Westerners have about the Middle East. For instance, many believe that Arabs distrust Westerners—and that they especially distrust Americans. Graf asserts that, while citizens of the UAE may not like the American government's policies, they truly admire the Western system of education and welcome Westerners to their country. "We try to hire American faculty, but we can't get

any to apply because they're afraid," says Graf. "It saddens me that Americans aren't represented among our faculty."

Many Westerners also still believe that Arab women do not work; yet, they are among the UAE's most ambitious citizens, Graf explains. In fact, two-thirds of the CBE's 2,200-member student body is female. Men, he says, most often pursue lifetime government or military jobs and so do not enroll in universities at the same rate as women do.

This is a trend that the CBE wants to change. "We have to make all students here realize that the private sector is the future," says Graf. "Companies here are asking our help with everything from strategic planning to reorganization."

Westerners who come to the Middle East need to ask questions in advance and, once they arrive,

"WE TRY TO HIRE AMERICAN FACULTY, BUT WE CAN'T GET ANY TO APPLY BECAUSE THEY'RE AFRAID."

—David Graf

surround themselves with those who understand the culture, says Graf. This will help them develop a true understanding of Arabic life.

At the same time, an ongoing challenge for the CBE is to embrace globalization while preserving the region's rich Arabic culture, says Graf. "There is so much Western influence, many here are afraid they're losing their Arabic heritage," says Graf. "That's what I like about our school—we preserve the Islamic culture while adapting to Western business practices." ■