

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

El-Baz Abdallah:

My studies is more combining data science and artificial intelligence, so mainly how to actually build models, AI models, to actually harness information or data. Always, I've always been passionate about is improving people's lives, so how can we use technology or how can you use, yes, data information itself to actually improve people's lives? When I've heard about Fulbright, because I've been working for quite some times and I never thought I'm going to do a master's, but I've heard about the prestigiousness of Fulbright and how much impact, not just the curriculum or the academic side of it, but just the networking of it as well and how much you get from it, I decided, "Let me just apply for this." It was very rigorous, as every Fulbright can actually tell you, however, it was really, really worth it.

John Boccacino:

Each summer, the College of Professional Studies here at Syracuse University hosts a prestigious preparatory program that helps dozens of international Fulbright students begin their journeys to their graduate degrees and their graduate research called the Pre-Academic Fulbright Program, and for every summer since 2015, Syracuse University has been a proud host site. By my math, that means we are celebrating our 10-year anniversary as a host institution of the Pre-Academic Fulbright Program. Today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are going to tell two incredible stories of graduate students who have had significant impact and benefited from coming to campus as part of this program. Our first student, I wanted to introduce him to you. He's charismatic, he's energetic, and he loved the program so much he's now a facilitator helping to mold the minds of future generations who are coming through this program here. His name is El-Baz Abdallah. He is studying data analytics in the School of Information Studies here at Syracuse. El-baz, it's a pleasure to have you on.

El-Baz Abdallah:

It is a pleasure to be here as well, John. Thank you so much for the beautiful introduction. You've said it very, very well, it is an amazing opportunity to actually be part of the Pre-Academic and now be a facilitator as well. You've put into words exactly what I was asking as well. I am also just fascinated of when they decide to create such a program, because it's a very, very smart and impactful program as well that helped me, and I'm seeing it firsthand right now helping new, young in Fulbright. Yeah, it's not just your beautiful words, but it is a fact that it's an amazing program.

John Boccacino:

Let's get a little background on yourself. Where are you from originally and where's your passion for the Fulbright Program and for data analytics come from?

El-Baz Abdallah:

Basically, since I was very, very young, I remember maybe, I know, 10 or less than that, I remember the first time I received my first computer. I got lucky because I was born in a family where they're very educated, but I'm from an island called Comoros Island, which is in the east of Africa, where I had so many opportunities such as, since a very young age, I was in front of the computer a lot. I taught myself how to use a computer, of course. I was even, I think when I was 12, given tutorials to some, I would say, teachers in the high school on how to actually record their papers so they can print and give it to the teachers. I was really exposed to that, and thank God I was just fascinated

I did computer science in France and I did some time also in Malaysia. I started ~~also learning~~ English, of course, through that, and the exposure also of traveling, but my passion is still data analytics, how to actually get information and transform it so that it can better people's lives. That has always been my passion, so when I've heard about Fulbright, because I've been working for quite some times and I never thought I'm going to do a master's, ~~but~~ I've heard about the prestigiousness of Fulbright and how much impact, not just the curriculum or the academic side of it, but just the networking of it as well and how much you get from it, I decided, "Let me just apply for this." It was very rigorous, as every Fulbright can actually tell you, however, it was really, really worth it. Because when I got, first of all, the response that I am a Fulbright, I was asked to do a Pre-Academic before my school start. They actually asked me and I was like, "What is this exactly?"

Let me try it because you never know until you try. Yeah. Because I've traveled a little bit maybe one semester, like I mentioned, in Malaysia, but it's a very different ~~environment~~ coming to the U.S. and coming here to study in the U.S. It's a totally different environment, totally different setup in terms of education, all of that. I did not know, so I thought I was prepared, until I came. Through that, through the Pre-Academic, I was informed, or at least I was reminded just how very different and ~~important~~ it was, actually, to actually be part of it. That decision, when I was asked, "Do you want to do the Pre-Academic," I'm glad I said yes because ~~I've~~ I've learned a lot. I cannot even put it into words or in the paper just how much I've learned in terms of networking, but just staying academically, how to write in the format that is used here in the U.S., how to express myself, because I'm a French speaker of course, ~~to express~~ to express yourself in a way that your ideas can naturally be put into words ~~and~~ people can understand you.

This is something that I really, really mastered during ~~the~~ Pre-Academic. I can go on and on where to find resources, because once again, we know the word resources, but truly how to find those resources and use them to succeed in whatever idea or adventure you are in, all of that, actually, I learned, to be honest, or at least I will use the word mastered during my Pre-Academic, because I had friends, I had lecturers, I had beautiful support. That actually helped me a lot in that matter.

John Boccacino:

What are some of the ways that this program helped with your transition and your cultural adjustment?

EI-Baz Abdallah:

That is a beautiful question. Once again, it helped me tremendously, because just talking from the... Let's talk about the cultural side because ~~we~~ we tend to not think of it too much, especially even before I came as well. I thought it's a different country, of course, and these are different people, but it was a big, big adjustment for me in terms of the food, in terms of the people, in terms of having to speak English every day, first of all, and having to use... I mean, thinking, because before... Now, I'm actually better, but before, I had to think in French first and then express myself in English, which used to take a little bit of lagging, as in the U.S., you can ~~do it~~ do it. For me, the transition was...

Once again, I want to go back ~~441~~ -1, I want to go back to your culture as ... Now, I'd like to go back to your culture as ... Now, I'd like to go back to your culture as ...

The process is great, straightforward, but here, you have to actually do this. They have to even check your visa. You have to create a lot of things. But through that tradition, ~~exposed~~ to my host family who helped me a lot in finding a place, and adjusting, and looking for ways to go around from... The easiest way to go from my place to the school. Academically as well, there is also, of course, like I've mentioned, there is so many ways. I'm not also used to, for example, in classes, people interacting directly with the lecturer. "I did not understand that. Can you elaborate this?" et cetera.

In my background, you just go to class, you're like 300, you take notes if you want. If you don't, the lecturer will come, talk, and leave, and then it's up to you to actually do your research and understand everything that was said in class. I was already used to that, and then coming here, learning that you can actually ask, these are just very normal thing here. You can ask question in class. If you have a problem, there is office hours, they call it, after the lecture, where you can actually go ~~office~~ and discuss with the lecturers further about ~~something~~ something you do not understand, or about your research, or so many things. Those are things that I also would not have known if I just started right away, if I did not do the Pre-Academic. It was tremendously helpful for me. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

This is the launching pad towards your master's degree as being a graduate student, and comes with that the research aspect. Research as an undergrad is different than research as a graduate ~~student~~ student. How you find your skills as a researcher being honed and developed through this program?

El-Baz Abdallah:

We actually learn, I taught, which we even do a presentation here in the library, how to ~~prepare~~ showcase a showcasing your research, or a thesis, or something like that that you've been working on. This is also, like you mentioned, it's very, very different from an undergrad or even during the time I was working as a project manager, because it's very, very different how to cite, for example. Citation, for me, was something I could not even understand. I think it took me a whole day just to understand that you cannot just use someone's ideas and make it your own. I ~~didn't~~ understand that, so that's one example. Other thing is how to actually... You have an idea, but you have to read books and then find a way to actually pass that idea into a paper. You cannot just have an idea.

For example, I have this idea and I'm just starting to write, but you have to... I mean, it pushes you to do more research in terms of reading books. I've learned also about peer-to-peer papers, so many different things in terms of research that I honestly had no idea, because being also from an engineering background, we do more on project, like hands-on projects, more than the research part of it. Coming to grad school, it'll have been disastrous if I had to start ~~right~~ and having to understand how, for example, AI impacts people in their daily life, because that's exactly what I'm passionate about, what I want to do. But we don't just do the technical part, ~~but~~ also learn about critical thinking and all of these things that, for me, ~~was~~ very, very new. But thank God to the Pre-Academy. It was a beautiful introduction at least. I don't ~~know~~ if you say segue into that. For me, once again, it was amazing and it was very, very helpful. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

Now, I know in the history of the program, more often than not, the students of Fulbrighters come, they go through the intensive program, they make their friends, they learn how to develop their research skills, and then you go on to other schools across the country as part of the American education system. You go to wherever you want to pursue your master's. What made you want to be one of the students ~~only~~ to not say, "My time was so great in the Fulbright Pre-Academic Program. I want to get my master's here at the iSchool"?

EI-Baz Abdallah:

I chose Syracuse to do my master's before the choice of doing the Pre-Academic here as well, but it

an island of people like that, so an idea that will be extremely helpful also, implementing it in my island, whom they don't have this kind of incentives, of course, but they earn less so how actually be able to sustain... Know how to pay how much the amount of bill in this in terms of with this weather. That's just one of the project. I can explain more, of course.

Another project also, which I actually presented during the Pre-Academic as well, is a project that working with my mom in terms of enhancing maternal healthcare in my island, which is Comoros Island. My mom is a gynecologist, and I've lived my life hearing her talk about these kind of things. One of the problematics is people tend to lose the baby without knowing, and so one of the ideas that I discussed with my mom. I'm actually doing the project, this is called a capstone. These are the final project have to work on during the two years of your master's, is to actually being able also to build an AI model to analyze the woman's and the baby's heart rates. Just doing some analysis to get more data and use also the already existing data to be able to know that when it happens, for example, we have to actually act so people don't have to move from rural areas all the way to the capital city, which is how our country is set up, in order to get medical attention, or even moving from one island to another medical attention.

Sometimes it's too late, sometimes they don't even know, so how to actually be able to make closer, not just telemedicine, but actually make it even more closer than that, that we have data that's coming in real time about the status of the mother and the child. Through that, I'm working on right now with my mom, of course, and also with the high school to be able to implement this project. All these kind of projects I'm exposed to maybe, I'll say, summarizing a little bit of what I'm passionate about and what I'm learning also in the high school in terms of how to use data analytics and using AI, having the support of AI in order to actually improve people's lives. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned always wanting to make a difference and give back. Through your research at the iSchool to being a facilitator here at the Pre-Academic program, I would say you're doing a great job of being the best version of yourself, giving back and trying to lift people up, and also lift yourself up too-

EI-Baz Abdallah:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

... to really reach those dreams. It's really been a pleasure to have you on and get to tell your story.

EI-Baz Abdallah:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

His name is EI-Baz Abdallah. He's doing great work here with the Pre-Academic Program and in the

like to be useful, of course, and already knowing because I've been through that is, for me, amazing because I can make it easy for all of them by answering a question, guiding them, give them advice, et cetera. Once again, thank you so much. As you can see, I'm very happy to talk about this. Thank you for the exposure of this podcast, John.

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

I'm really happy to know about all of the information in here, from how do we write... Should be writing our research, how do we write our biographies as a graduate students, all of these things that would help us into adapting more to the educational system in the United States, because have not been introduced into such thing back home in our education system. I think to prepare us even academic-wise into expecting what do they expect from us to do as a graduate students, because I have the bachelor experience back at home but I don't know how the graduate student life looked like, especially in America. Yeah, I think it was a really good idea, and I'm happy that I'm here.

John Boccacino:

You heard about one of the key success stories we had on the first part of this podcast, El-Baz Abdallah. Well, one of the people that he helps a facilitator is kind enough to join us here on part two of our podcast. She is Budoor Basim Mohammed, who, after she's done with the academic program here at Syracuse, will be going on to the University of Nebraska to study her master's engineering with a focus in environmental engineering. Budoor, it's a pleasure to have you on. Thanks for joining us.

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

Thank you very much. Happy to be here.

John Boccacino:

Give our audience a little background on yourself, where you are from originally, what really intrigued you in this Pre-Academic Fulbright Program.

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

I come from Iraq. I'm Iraqi, and I lived there for 25 years. For us, as part of the Fulbright Program, it was optional to go for the Pre-Academic or not. I felt like, "Yes, maybe I should do that. It'll be a good preparation," and I think I made the right decision. It was a great decision. I do think that it gives a great intro trial into what is to be in a university before actually going to the university, although now I will be having a very high expectation on how a campus should look like because of Syracuse University. The campus here is very beautiful. It's an absolute pleasure to just walk around, and look at it, and inside the halls. It's really great. Yeah. I think to prepare us even academic-wise into expecting what do they expect from us to do as a graduate students, because I have the bachelor experience back at home, but don't know how the graduate student life look like, especially in America. Yeah, I think it was a really good idea, and I'm happy that I'm here.

John Boccacino:

What has been your experience in the adjustment process? What lessons have you learned about how higher ed works here in America versus your undergraduate, your bachelor's experience in Iraq?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

Well, it's completely different. I cannot even do a comparison, a fair comparison, because back home, we only have core courses. We have to take them. The relationship with the professors is extremely formal.

We have to call them professor, doctor, and their first name. The way that the class would look like, the way that we are graded, the way we communicate, everything about it is completely different, even the way that we get graded. Yeah, it's very different. But again, I'm really happy to know about all of the information in here, from how do we write... Should be writing our research, how do we write our biographies as graduate students, all of these things that would help us into adapting more to the educational system in the United States

John Boccacino:

I like the way the program is instinctually set up to equip the students with the skills that they need. What I mean by that, during the morning, you get to go through the English Learning Institute, English lessons, English classes to make you feel more comfortable with the language. You've already got a good proficiency, I can tell, on the English language. But how did that help having the structure things with the English Language Institute, and then the afternoons, the presentations, the workshops? How beneficial was that?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

It was really beneficial, because although we speak English, the way we speak, it might be different from the way that we should communicate it. You should know how to use the right vocabularies when and how, how to talk with your friends, with the people on the street, with your professor. Academically, you're using different vocabularies from the street talk that you're using. Even the words that you have to use for the education sometimes can differ from, for example, interpreting it directly from Arabic to English, so it was really insightful to learn all of that. Diane and Lisa, our instructors, they were great. They were such a great support into teaching us that and noting these things for us. I'm really glad that we get to know about these things now earlier because this is really important into equipping us with the right vocabulary to use when we go there.

John Boccacino:

We've covered the academic side, so far, with you talking about your experiences here in the Pre-Academic Fulbright Program, but just as important is the cultural and the social aspects. The fact that it's you and 43 other international students, what kind of camaraderie, what kind of friendship do you all form going through this together?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

I think we are really glad that we have such a great harmony between us. Because we're all international students in here, we're still all trying to figure things out. We're trying to support each other and adjust to the whole environment, but I think we're doing it really great. Everyone is really kind and sweet with each other and helping each other as much as we can. We're having fun, we're learning. But from that aspect, one of the things that I do realize that when we came here, we already realized that we don't just need to adjust to the America or the state's culture, but also to the other cultures in here. The United States is a very diverse country. We are over 20 background students from over 20 country, and you get to deal with all of that all at the same time, learn their way of doing things, their culture, their words, their music, their body language.

How great that is to be specifically in the Fulbright? Because sometimes you can get a scholarship in a university but you'll never have that much of extensive experience in one place, that you have over 20 nationality sitting with you around the same table, and learning the same thing as you are, and hearing from them how even their educational system back home differ or have similarity with you and how

diverse from the United States. We literally had that today in the class, how we got accepted in universities, in our countries. It was completely different from one to another and really impressive.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to that melting pot, again, having the 20 different countries for this year's cohort coming together, it's got to be nice too to have that you're not alone in this, because I'm sure you can feel homesick at times. I mean, granted you're in Syracuse in the summer, not during our subfreezing winters like El-Baz has gone through, but the acclimation, how did your group or how did your facilitator maybe play a key role in helping you with your adjustment?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

Let's just start with something. A huge thanks to our facilitators, to also David, to Jackie, to Kelsey. They've been such a great support, very kind and supporting, and they do really, let's say, deal with us. They know that what we are going is very new to us and we are trying to adjust it and adapt with it as much as possible. They're making it as much easy as it can. When it comes to the students, yes, I do think that we all feel kind of the same because it is something that is new to most of us as well, and we're like, let's say, strangers to each other, but we got to be friends very fast, very quickly.

I do feel like sometimes we have that language barrier, because English is our second language, but we are working it out. I think, in the end, we have that understanding in that we do realize that the different backgrounds is something to embrace and something that will make us learn more, know more, and even be happy to know about that we... Okay, I met someone from this country in that country and I learned about new cultures.

John Boccacino:

What is one or two examples that you feel like sharing of specifically the work your facilitator, how they helped strengthen your relationship, further your academic research, your passion for knowledge?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

I think that the recap that we do sometimes gives or stabilize the roots of what we have learned at the end of the day. It is something very informal, but at the same time, very encouraging. We recap all of these vocabulary story, and try to phrase them, and have a more understanding of what we learned during the day, because sometimes it can be too much. But then when we all sit together and we're recapping slowly, and she's asking these of questions, and we're trying to answer it and think about, "Is it this? Is it that?" sometimes some people can be shy and they wouldn't ask sometimes the questions that they wanted to ask, or they didn't get, let's say, a vocabulary well.

We make sure that, during that session, everything is much clearer, and it really helps. I really like that part of the day when it feels like so slow and smooth, and, at the same time, very encouraging for us as well to express ourself with someone, let's say, our age. We feel like she is our friend more than, to be honest, a facilitator, and we love that.

John Boccacino:

Now, how about the social component of the program? What are some fun things that the group has done to explore the city of Syracuse, to just have a little bit of downtime and enjoy life here in Syracuse?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

We've done some great, not just fun activities. We were at Niagara Falls yesterday.



John Boccacino:

Okay, what was that... As a first time visitor, how can you describe that experience?

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

Amazing. I mean, I got some Oppenheimer music vibes when I was looking at Niagara Falls. I was like, even when I posted it later on Instagram, I put the Oppenheimer music like we were in a movie. Wallah, the way that we were all looking at them, I've never had such experience in my life. I'm really glad that I got to do it. It was the best trip ever, one of the best actually in my life. Thank you, honestly, for ELI demonstrating, and working, and adjusting all of that, and, let's say, coordinating it for us.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's great to hear that you get the balance and holistic development experience. It's not just the academics, it's the cultural and the social part as well. But the cold hard facts are that once the program ends on August 9th, you are going to be embarking on this graduate program at the University of Nebraska. Tell us a little bit about your interest in civil engineering and how you want to make a difference in the world by getting that degree.

Budoor Basim Mohammed:

Well, I worked as a chemical service engineer in water technology company called Metito, and I'm really grateful for all the people that I learned with because they gave me that passion. I had a background in oil and gas because Iraq is a very rich country in oil and gas, so everyone who graduated was like, "I want to work in oil and gas." But then, later on, I figured out that this might not be my passion, especially that I was interested in going eco-friendly, sustainability, renewable energy, the environment since I was at college. But we had very, very few opportunities like that in my country, because unfortunately, it is still not that much being supported by the public or the private sector. But then I got that chance to work in water technology as a chemical service engineer, and I fell in love with water.

When that happened, I knew that, okay, I want to do my master degree in environmental engineering specifically. Now, why did I pick civil engineering majorly? Because apparently, in America, environmental engineering is under civil engineering. In my country, it's under chemical engineering. This is one of the differences that I was shocked with at the first time I was doing my application. I was like, "Wait, why is environmental engineering under civil engineering? Isn't that supposed to be construction and this is chemical engineering?" I was going through different courses and classes in different universities until, "Okay, okay. Now I get it. Now it makes sense." This is one of the reasons I even choose to have chosen UNL, specifically because of the path that I want to take in water technology and to studying water treatment and the water pollution, which is a very arising problem in my country and all over the world and needs much more attention, because one day, we're going to have very, very limited resources for water, and we are going to have to deal with that very efficiently.

One of the things that people also do not realize, and the government is not paying attention to in my country, is that most of the people are drinking well water. We have the rivers, but we're not really using them because we have very high total dissolved solids in the water that it's very expensive to treat it and to drink it later on. It's a very long, hard process, and the government is not willing to facilitate or help on that. Again, this is not just in my country, but because now we have a shortage of water, so we are going through this more and more and people are drilling more wells. Again, we're drinking only our water that's based on groundwater while people think it's from the river.

But in the future, that will be going all around the world because we are consuming water, consuming water, and recycling less, less, less than what we are consuming because of a few awareness about usage and how to deal with it. Yeah, I think this is one of the huge problems that we are going to be facing in the future. Water technology is a very wide sector and field. It needs a lot of learning and

consistent learning. I wanted to accelerate my knowledge about water technology at a younger age in my career, in the beginning of my career, so I can be well-equipped in my career in the future.

John Boccacino:

What would you say would be a dream job along the lines of water technology, making water potable, cleaning up the water supply? What do you want to do? How do you want to make a difference with that? Do you want to go back home to Iraq?

Budoor Basim Mohammed: