

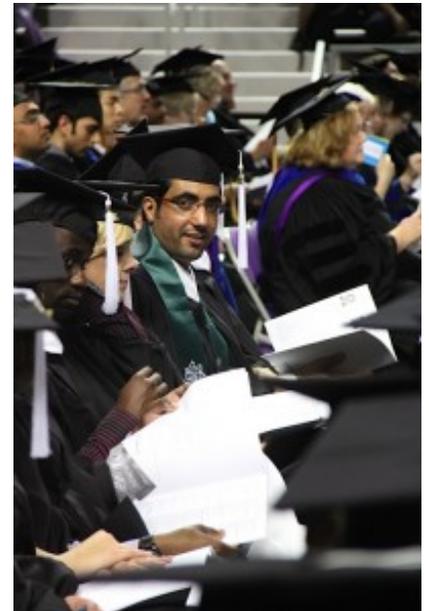
# Student Ambassador Building Bridges: A Conversation with Zeyad Al-Shammari

## Editor's Note:

Zeyad Al-Shammari came to the United States with reasonable expectations for the international education experience that was ahead of him even though his conception of America was based solely on media depictions and word-of-mouth insights. And although members of his family were wary of him studying abroad in the United States they were a source of support for him when he was accepted to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and moved to the United States.

Almost immediately, his initial expectations seemed not to have been met and Zeyad began to doubt his experience abroad would yield any positive results. Yet with big political and diplomatic aspirations in mind, Zeyad persevered to achieve both undergraduate and graduate degrees in the United States while forming a love and respect for the American people.

In his interview with SUSRIS, Zeyad reflects on his many experiences including the attitudes of Americans he met, running from the welcoming and friendly to the openly hostile. He talked about his acceptance of all people, cultures, and ideologies despite the negative impact of a few small minded “bad seeds” as he calls them. Seeking to bolster the cultural image of Saudi Arabian society among his fellow American students, Zeyad helped organize the Saudi Students Club of Tennessee at Tennessee Tech University, where he achieved his undergraduate degree. The club is one of about 100 such organizations across 39 states in America.



At [Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville](#) he interned at the [Tennessee World Affairs Council](#) and on the SUSRIS staff. One of his SUSRIS projects was conducting an interview with then Tennessee Tech University President Dr. Robert Bell, who told Zeyad the “wonderful opportunity for all of the students here at the university, not just the Saudi students, is to get a chance to experience the culture of another country. It’s special that we have this large number coming from Saudi Arabia.” [The complete interview will be reprinted on Friday as part of this week's focus on education.]

Zeyad’s other leadership positions in Tennessee, experiences at the Tennessee World Affairs Council and the National Council on US-Arab Relations in Washington, D.C. contributed to fuel his diplomatic aspirations and hopes of tackling “future concerns and misunderstandings about Saudi Arabia.”

He attributes his successes thus far to the opportunities provided by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. Without it he might not have ever found his calling to build bridges between Saudis and Americans on cultural, social, political, and economic fronts.

*This week SUSRIS is sharing insights and perspectives about the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which supports the overseas studies of over 100,000 Saudi young men and women around the world. Other articles and interviews in this series are listed below.*

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**[SUSRIS]** Can you tell us about your background? Where are you from in Saudi Arabia? What were your schools like growing up? Can you tell us about your family, friends and experiences growing up?

**[Zeyad Al-Shammari]** My name is Zeyad Al Shammari and I recently graduated with a Masters Degree from Kansas State University, majoring in Political Science and International Relations. My hometown is the city of Hail, located in the northern part of Saudi Arabia. I am a sports fan, and my town's favorite sport is soccer. I also like riding horses.



In Hail and throughout Saudi Arabia the family is highly emphasized. My immediate family consists of seven brothers and eight sisters. As a family unit we are very tight-knit and progressive thinkers. I am very proud to be part of my family who makes up part of the most famous tribe in Saudi Arabia, the Al Shammari tribe. Words alone cannot express the deep sentiments I have for my tribe. When I was in my country, I had a very narrow view of the world since my life only revolved around my family. My family helped me with everything I needed in life, and I never realized how much I depended on them until I moved to the United States.

**[SUSRIS]** Why were you interested in studying in the United States?

**[Al-Shammari]** When I was in high school, I became interested in studying in the United States because it has a good education system and is well respected in the international community. My family and community were concerned about the idea of me studying in the US, but nonetheless my father supported me in studying abroad. Therefore, I applied for the scholarship at the Ministry of Higher Education and was honored to have received the scholarship. This was how I was able to receive both my undergraduate and graduate degrees in the US.

**[SUSRIS]** What were your expectations before you arrived in the U.S. in terms of the city you would be living in, the school, the community, the students, and any other things about the U.S. you had in mind?

**[Al-Shammari]** I found that the media in the East and the West created misconceptions and sweeping generalizations about both sides. I assumed that Americans were more internationally inclined than they really are. I have heard some Americans think all people from Saudi Arabia have oil in their pockets. I wish this was the case, but this is not true. I would like to tell Americans to throw out the stereotypes of Saudis they may hold. They should be more open-minded about people from Saudi Arabia. One of the greatest things I learned in the America is to always filter out things in the media and to think independently, and this is my recommendation when developing one's views.

I would also like to tell Saudis to not believe everything that is said in the media about Americans. I found that most of American people are down to earth and friendly. For example, what stands out to me is how the people will greet and smile at you in the streets. I expected the social structure to be tight-knit like Saudi Arabia, but that was not the case. I also learned from living here in America that one has to read often to learn.

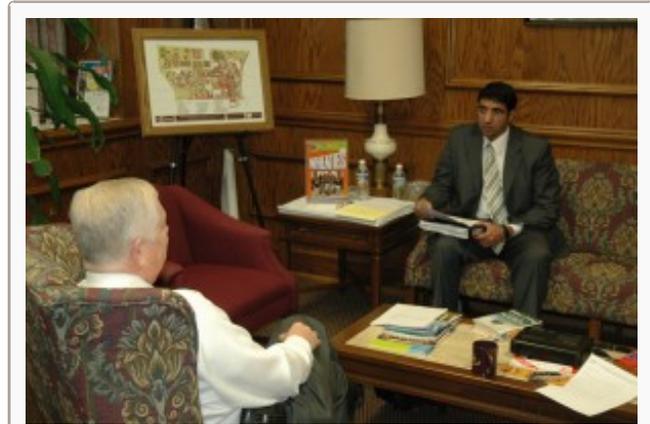
**[SUSRIS]** What was different in your experience from your expectations of the U.S.? How difficult was it to adjust to American culture and the way of doing things?

**[Al-Shammari]** I think the individualistic mentality that prevails in American culture was the major shock for me after I moved here. Initially I thought this would negatively impact my study abroad experience. However, it truly expanded my horizons. Since I have been living in the United States, I discovered something about myself that I never knew before I came here. My immediate career-goal of becoming a Saudi Arabian diplomat to the United States is directly related to the amount of personal growth I experienced while living here. Since coming here, I have been living a very successful independent life. I have a much broader perspective of the world and I'm constantly striving to accomplish my goals.

**[SUSRIS]** What were among the positive experiences you had in the United States, at school, and in the community?

**[Al-Shammari]** My best experiences were related to the the general friendliness and welcoming attitude of Americans across the country. The American people are hospitable, helpful, and respectful. Although some might not be as internationally experienced as I expected, I found them eager to learn about different cultures and traditions. I was fortunate to make many great friends during my time studying. I really learned to respect and love the American people.

I experienced life with five American families while I was studying English in Florida, and that was a wonderful introspective experience. When I moved to Tennessee after polishing my English skills, I engaged more with the American people. My internship in Washington, D.C. focused on international affairs and education and was an invaluable experience. But studying for my master's degree in Kansas was unforgettable. I cannot say one experience was better than the other. They each added a different layer of value in shaping who I am today.



Zeyad Al-Shammari interviewing Tennessee Tech University President Robert Bell while an undergraduate student.

**[SUSRIS]** What were the negative experiences you had in the U.S., at school, and in the community?

**[Al-Shammari]** Last summer, I wanted to sublease my apartment in Manhattan, Kansas, while I participated in an internship in Washington, D.C. Luckily, I found someone who worked at Kansas State University to rent my apartment while I was gone. When he showed up at my door, he was holding a book in his hands. He asked me if I knew what the book was, and I replied that I didn't know what it was. He told me it was the Bible. I thought it was odd that he would make that point, but he looked around my apartment anyway and said that he would sub-lease it for the full three months. Upon my return he had destroyed everything in my apartment. I called him and asked him why he would do such a thing, and he answered with a vulgar reference to me being an Arab. I ended up having my day in court, and I won my case.

Does this mean that all people from Kansas are bad? No, it just means he was a hateful person. Many people in my life from Kansas have been wonderful to me. Some neighbors have helped my so much that I think of them as my second family. They even helped take care of me after I had surgery. They are wonderful, kind, and good-hearted people.

No matter where you are from, there are going to be destructive people, destructive not only to themselves but to others. This has gone on for centuries and will continue long past my time here on this earth. That being said, the few people considered "bad seeds" or "evil" should not be construed to be the majority. Each religion teaches peace and tolerance. Jesus taught to "love thy neighbor more

than thy self" and so did Mohammed. They both are prophets: may peace and blessings be upon them both, and upon all who may read this.

**[SUSRIS]** What would you tell Saudi students who were considering studying in the United States to be prepared for?

**[Al-Shammari]** My advice to them would be to not believe everything said in the media. I think the media can be both helpful and harmful in understanding the differences. Let Americans know who you are through face-to-face engagement and through experiences. Be involved in the American society and be sure to let the American people know you well, from your culture to everything else about being a Saudi and not just from the media's projections. Do away with stereotypes and please present your culture and country well.

Take advantage and learn from the American society and apply it to yourself as person. Please think of our King Abdullah for giving us this great opportunity, and be sure to take the opportunity to thank the American people for welcoming us to their country. Also, I advise everyone to not blame and judge anyone by her or his color, nationality, faith and culture, before you know the person. In addition, don't be controlled by what the media tries to tell people about others.

**[SUSRIS]** How do you think your education in the United States will prepare you for the future compared to studying at a Saudi Arabian university?

**[Al-Shammari]** Taking the knowledge I acquired in the United States, I hope to fulfill my long-term professional goal of having the privilege of representing Saudi Arabia on the international stage. There is no way I could work in international affairs without international experience, and studying here gave me that. Representing a nation comprised of so many ethnicities might seem like an undesirable job for most people. However, the opportunity to represent my community by understanding their cultural and social needs has directed me toward politics, more specifically in representing Saudi Arabia as an Ambassador.

Until then, I have made it my personal goal to help foster relationships between the two countries. Early in 2009, I served as an intern for the Saudi-US Relations Information Service, the [SUSRIS.com project](#). By representing Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C. and Georgetown University, I had the opportunities to meet with foreign dignitaries and American officials and discuss future concerns and misunderstandings about Saudi Arabia. This has provided me with invaluable insight in working in a political climate while helping me to grow as an individual.

**[SUSRIS]** Who was the greatest influence on you while studying in the United States and why?

**[Al-Shammari]** I had an internship with the [National Council on US-Arab Relations, NCUSAR](#), in Washington where I met my greatest influence Doctor John Duke Anthony. He is a top-of-the-line scholar in Arabian Gulf affairs. I admire his work and hope I can represent Saudi Arabia the same way he represents the U.S., through dialogue about policy issues among stakeholders in international affairs. He has managed to cross the bounds of cultural nuances and was able to grasp the Arabian socio-cultural perspectives from an intrinsic understanding. That is part of my goal as a student studying abroad in the United States.

**[SUSRIS]** In your travels in the United States during your university studies what was your favorite place, and why?

**[Al-Shammari]** I traveled all over the United States. I enjoyed my travels throughout the country overall, but I enjoyed big cities more because they are diverse and multicultural. I particularly enjoyed Washington, D.C.



because it is a major hub of politics for the world. Since I mainly studied International Relations, D.C. is the perfect playing field to cultivate my career path.



**[SUSRIS]** In what ways did the Saudi scholarship program help build bridges between Saudis and Americans? Were you involved in outreach events and programs with your school or community?

**[Al-Shammari]** After arriving at Tennessee Tech University, I discovered Saudi culture and image was misconstrued. To help resolve the negative stereotypes, I took it upon myself to found the first [Saudi Students Club of Tennessee](#). Acting as ambassadors of Saudi culture — through dialogues, festivities, and traditions — the Saudi Students Club served as an informative foundation to American students seeking to better understand Saudi culture while also providing resources for incoming Saudi students starting their studies in the United States.

During my volunteer work at SUSRIS, I began to notice that the political and economic relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia has been well established. However, an important aspect often overlooked when understanding international relations is that the societal understanding has been grotesquely misrepresented. Both the US and Saudi media are poorly informed about the culture of each other's society. By working with SUSRIS, we sought to better the understanding of Saudi Arabian culture in the United States. Besides experiences in politics and global affairs, being the captain of a soccer and volleyball team has given me opportunities to develop leadership experience. Without my scholarship, I would have never had the opportunity to participate and engage in these particular activities in the United States. This is where my true education occurred.

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#### **Additional Information:**

- [Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the US \(SACM\)](#)
- [The Saudi Cultural Mission's New Headquarters – SUSRIS – Jul 25, 2012](#)
- [King Abdullah Scholarship Program: The Saudi Arabian Educational Youth Stride – SUSRIS – Jul 30, 2012](#)
- [Student Ambassador Building Bridges: A Conversation with Zeyad Al-Shammari – SUSRIS – Jul 31, 2012](#)
- [A New Vision of America: A Conversation with Mashhour Alqahtani – SUSRIS – Aug 1, 2012](#)
- [Saudi Students at Tennessee Tech: A Conversation with Dr. Robert Bell \(Reprint\) – SUSRIS – Aug 3, 2012](#)

#### **Related Material on SUSRIS:**

- [Business Forum: Education – Investing in Human Capital: Prince Faisal – SUSRIS – Jan 9, 2012](#)
- [Education and Development: Women as Agents of Change – SUSRIS – Jan 31, 2011](#)
- [Higher Education Opportunities for Women – SUSRIS – Mar 12, 2010](#)
- [Education System Undergoing Major Overhaul – SUSRIS – Apr 25, 2007](#)

- [The Time is Now in Saudi Arabia – Complete Interview – SUSRIS – Apr 27, 2006](#)
- [The Need for Education Reform – “Saudi System is the Problem” – SUSRIS – May 31, 2005](#)

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