

Fulbright Foreign Language Program Enriches Campus Culture

Eight years ago, supported by a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching grant, Khaled Abunaama spent a year at Mercy College, teaching Arabic language and culture. As a newcomer to the United States, he leaned heavily on his contacts at Mercy to help him apply for the prestigious grant, obtain a visa, and navigate living and teaching in a foreign country for a year.

The Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) program was designed to improve Americans' knowledge of foreign cultures and languages by inviting native-speaking teachers to foreign-language classrooms at American colleges and universities. Now in its 12th year at Mercy, the FLTA program has not only boosted Mercy's Arabic courses, but also benefits a succession of Arabic-speaking foreign educators, allowing them to hone their professional skills while gaining in-country knowledge of the U.S., its culture and its people.

The FLTAs teach classes in Arabic language and culture for two semesters, progressing from teaching assistant to independent faculty within the year.

Sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the FLTA program at Mercy began in 2010 with a grant from the Institute of International Education's (IIE) Fulbright program.



(left to right) Dr. Alan Hartman, Dr. Luis Garcia, Dr. Nereida Segura-Rico, Dr. Victoria Tomasulo, FLTA Yara Mahajena, and Dr. Elise Arnold-Levene

Since its inception, Mercy has hosted a total of 12 FLTAs hailing from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Israel. The experience benefits both sides and opens doors for FLTAs in ways they may have never imagined. Mercy students learn Arabic from a native speaker, thus broadening their worldview and career options after graduation, especially in industries with an international presence. The teaching assistants, most of whom have never been to the U.S., return to their home countries fortified by a year of professional development at a respected American college while absorbing American culture and professional practices. "It's a very prestigious and enriching opportunity, and it changes their world," said

Associate Professor, Director of Modern Foreign Languages and FLTA Coordinator Alan Hartman, D.M.L. He added that some go on to entirely different careers, depending on opportunities they have been exposed to while in the U.S.

Abunaama now lives in Leeds, United Kingdom, where he is an Arabic dialect coach for television and films produced in the U.K. by Disney, Apple TV+ and others. Working with directors, writers and script supervisors, he provides cultural input and dialect for scripts under development.

"Teaching at Mercy gave me and my students the opportunity to question the distorted picture of Arabic culture that they see in the media. With minds and eyes opened, people can



FLTA Khaled Abunaama, at the University of Leeds, Leeds, U.K., where he completed his master's degree in education after leaving Mercy.



Former FLTA Naimaa Khelfat is from Algeria.



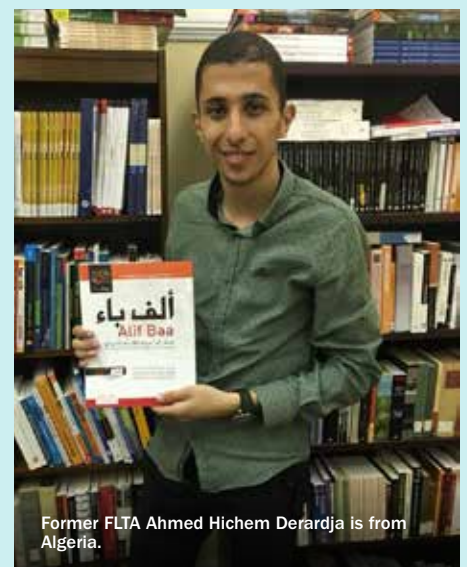
Former FLTA Shaimaa Rabag, from Egypt, in front of MercyManhattan

form their own perspective,” he said.

The global influence of Mercy’s foreign language program is expanding. Since 2019 the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) New York Metropolitan Chapter has regularly held chapter meetings at MercyManhattan. Additionally, Hartman has developed a five-year Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Master of Science in TESOL program, a Latin American and Latino Studies Minor, and the only Albanian language program on the East Coast, all of which enhance Mercy’s reputation as a center for language education throughout the New York Metropolitan area. The FLTA scholars have contributed to the growth of a

global culture on Mercy’s campuses and help the College establish relationships abroad that can build over time. One former FLTA, after leaving Mercy, secured a teaching job at the American University in Cairo. She invited Hartman to teach a virtual class as a visiting lecturer there in 2019.

“The FLTA in Arabic program is just one facet of Mercy’s lively Modern Foreign Languages Program that demonstrates how the College addresses the needs of its faculty and students while supporting programmatic innovation,” said Hartman. “It all adds up to a celebration of the globalized world into which our students will enter as professionals upon graduation.”



Former FLTA Ahmed Hichem Derardja is from Algeria.