

# International Students Feature: Syria

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This week, three international students from Syria, Bashar Alisber, a senior studying aerospace engineering, Fadi Eshak, a senior studying civil engineering, and Hamze ‘Leo’ Sukkar, a senior studying computer engineering and engineering management, were interviewed about the differences between their life back home and their life at Illinois Tech. As always, all interviewees were quick to say that they missed the food back home. According to Alisber, “food-wise, it’s a lot healthier back home...I used to rarely go and eat [out], like fast food or something, that was rare...even sometimes when you’re going hiking, we would cook our own food and then take it with us.” Alisber mentioned that food was commonly cooked using olive oil, and that his diet consisted of a lot of vegetables, especially salad. “Salad is very, very essential,” Alisber explained. “Every day, there has to be a salad dish before you get to a main meal.” Both Eshak and Sukkar also mentioned that the diet was much healthier back home. According to Sukkar, the “food [in Syria] has always been way, way healthier than the food we get here... It always felt right. Whereas here, a lot of times, it’s good but you don’t feel right when you’re eating it. And your mom’s cooking is always the best.” A typical dish you would find in Syria, Sukkar said, was usually served with rice or bread. One of the best dishes that Sukkar remembers from back home consisted of rice and ground beef stuffed in grape leaves, which was called yabra or diwali.

The weather, of course, also differs. “In winter, it’s cold, but not that cold,” Eshak said. Although, while winters are less harsh,

due to electricity problems and less insulation, “you feel it more than here,” according to Eshak. “You freeze inside more than outside.” Both Alisber and Sukkar also mentioned how the temperature inside buildings was much colder in Syria than in the US. In Sukkar’s words, “once you’re inside, you expect something warm but you get something cold.” In Alisber’s opinion, this difference may also be because “prices of fuel for warming the house is going way up.”

In terms of general culture, Sukkar explained how odd it was to be questioned about things about yourself that you thought were commonplace, such as religion or attire. In his words, “you don’t have to explain yourself as often as you do here. When you come here, you start noticing that people realize different things about you. You never thought that would be something you would have to explain.” Eshak mentioned that Syria is “more conservative than here.” Eshhak explained that young people dating is frowned upon, and is usually done in secret, which is especially important for the women. “There is no gender equality there,” Eshak said, although he added later that “there is gender equality in the well-educated families.” Alisber had similar thoughts, and in his words, “dating doesn’t happen as public as here. I had a girlfriend at home, but holding hands in public was frowned upon...Thing that I hate most is the inequality....You would still find people who have problems with their wives working.” Sukkar, however, presented a different perspective. “The school that I went to is a co-ed school, so I grew up with mixing both genders all of the time. There are parts of society where you can see issues with gender inequality. If you go there today, you might not

think it’s as it should be. But if you ask both parties, both parties are happy with what they have.”

Academically, Alisber mentioned that, “it is busier here. School keeps you busy.” In Syria, Alisber was used to solely a final exam at the end of the semester, with no homework. Alisber, however, appreciated the homework and found it useful. “I find it helpful,” Alisber said, “it’s a lot better to absorb the material that you’re learning.” Alisber also appreciated the internship opportunities he found here. According to him, “[internships] are not something common back home, it’s not at all common.” Sukkar commented on the fact that while high school is considered easier than college in the US, it is the opposite where he was from: high school was much harder. “I guess it’s a good thing, looking at it now, because now I’m used to all this, regardless of what pressure is put in my hand. The amount of work, what I’ve experienced in Syria, is way more. And a lot of it is the way they teach, it’s very dry: here are the textbooks, do your homework, do you exams. There’s nothing practical, nothing hands-on.” Perhaps the reason why high school was so difficult in Syria was because of the largely stressed exam that takes place at the end of high school. “Our last year, the graduation year,” Sukkar said, “is a standard test across the country where you have to memorize nine books cover to cover in two months. Then you have two weeks to get tested on all nine subjects...It’s the most disciplined I’ve ever been in my life... Thankfully I performed well, because this is the deciding factor of what you can do with your life...If you get over 300, you can go to medical school, which is the highest, usually. The lower your score, the less your choices are.”

As most of the world knows, Syria is currently involved in a civil war. Eshak remembers mornings in Syria where he would go outside to collect empty bullet shells that could be found on the ground. He remembered six separate incidents in which a bullet came into his house: once, Eshak recalled, “taking a shower, a bullet came through the bathroom window.” Because of this unrest, Eshak initially decided to move to Lebanon; however, the war in Syria spread through the Middle East. At that time, wanting to go to the United States, Eshak was pleased to receive a scholarship at Illinois Tech that allowed him to attend school here. However, Eshak said, the “visa process was difficult.” Eshak spend a lot of time on the phone with a counselor, who asked him a little bit about his education but mostly what he was doing in Syria. In the airport, after the 20 hour flight, he was sent to an interview room and sat for two hours, waiting, while the Illinois Tech bus came and went. Eshak said he was “asked same questions but in different phrases,” things like “are you planning to go back after graduation?” Alisber had a similar experience at the airport, where he got held up at customs for three hours; however, he recalls that nobody actually asked him anything during that period of time.

At the end of his interview, Alisber made sure to mention that he wanted to thank Illinois Tech for the opportunity to go to school here. “Without the scholarship I got here, my life would be a lot different,” Alisber said.

This section of TechNews needs volunteer international students in order to continue! Please contact adetweiler@hawk.iit.edu if you are willing to sit down for a short interview.

## UGSC debates the presence of pass/fail credits in honors designations during latest meeting

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Proposed by the Academic Affairs Committee of the Student Government Association (SGA) and formulated throughout last year in a process that involved SGA, the Undergraduate Studies Committee (UGSC), and eventually the University Faculty Council (UFC), Illinois Tech’s new Pass/Fail grading policy will finally come into effect next semester. The policy will allow undergraduate students to take up to three courses outside of traditional A through E letter grading, earning a grade of “Pass” for any performance which would typically result in a non-E grade. Intended to allow students to earn credit from free and technical electives that might lie outside their usual realm of study, the program is currently being logistically implemented by offices across campus to ensure that the university’s systems and rules are in concert with the new policy when it becomes active. At the most recent UGSC meeting on Tuesday, October 25, one such logistical facet turned into a lengthy debate over the previously

unconsidered question of how exactly to count pass/fail courses toward a student’s GPA for the purposes of graduation with honors.

Following some brief initial votes (including the passage of two co-terminal programs which were discussed in previous TechNews coverage of the UGSC), group Chair Ray Trygstad presented a proposed change to the qualifications for graduating with honors. The change itself was miniscule, simply removing the word “graded” from the existing policy because the definition of that word at the university level does not include pass/fail courses. However, the act of including pass/fail courses in consideration for honors brought up concerns from many present representatives of academic departments, and began an extended discussion of whether the change should be considered at all.

Many of the present UGSC members, who each represent an academic or administrative unit of the university, were concerned about whether counting pass/fail credits toward the 60-credit minimum required at Illinois Tech to qualify for honors we de-value the very idea of graduating with honors. The stated intent of the proposed

change was to accommodate fringe cases in which transfer students barely meet the 60-credit minimum for honors under the current system, recognizing that adding just one or two pass/fail courses could force those students to take additional courses beyond their degree requirements in order to graduate with honors. However, many present were concerned about more traditional students using the pass/fail policy to manipulate the honors system, achieving a higher GPA through judicious application of pass/fail course designations.

Some alternatives were offered, including the possible standard practice of counting pass/fail courses as a D grade within the GPA calculation used to determine honors status. The underlying argument for that particular proposal held that a passing grade in pass/fail grading essentially represented a D or above in standard grading, and that using the minimum was the most useful metric when applying the high standards for graduation honors. Some faculty, though, expressed concern that tackling this single issue wouldn’t actually cause much change, arguing “there’s always a way to chase that 3.75, or whatever

you need” and that students would find other options to twist their GPA. Following that argument, barring pass/fail courses from the 60-credit minimum would do more harm to transfer students than the potential harm done to the honors designation itself by abuse of the pass/fail program.

After generally agreeing that the standards for graduating with honors should remain high, Trygstad suggested that the group bring the issue back to their departments to gather a broader range of opinions before the next UGSC meeting. Nick Menhart, the representative from the Biology department, offered to draft alternate language which would address many of the problems representatives foresaw with the proposed change. A draft was emailed to UGSC members a few days later, and will be discussed when UGSC meets next.

UGSC gathers once every other Tuesday at 12:45 p.m. in Wishnick Hall. Official minutes and information about the organization can be found at iit.edu/~ugsc.

## National Society of Black Engineers hosts fair to promote STEM higher education



Photos by Jamshid Tokhirov