GEORGIA E. LESH-LAURIE, chancellor emerita of the University of Colorado Denver, recently returned to the US after serving as associate provost and chief academic officer at the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain, UAE. In her academic career, she has held leadership positions at Cleveland State University including interim provost and vice president for academic affairs. A publishing scientist with many refereed articles in Developmental Biology and Education, Lesh-Laurie has received numerous grants from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. She received her BS from Marietta College, her MS from Marietta College, her PhD from the University of Wisconsin and her PhD from Case Western Reserve University.

Frustration may have marked much of Georgia Lesh-Laurie’s two years of service at the United Arab Emirates University where her mission was to help Westernize the university, but “living and working in a Muslim country was a marvelous, exhilarating and very meaningful experience,” she said.

Speaking at the International Executive Roundtable, Lesh-Laurie described the 37-year-old UAE as a country with a high tolerance for inefficiency and a somewhat careless attitude toward time. “This makes it quite difficult for a somewhat up-tempo American like myself to successfully survive,” she added.

“Emirates remark that they want to be more Western but they find it hard to take that step. Nor would I have expected them to adapt to our wily ways very quickly,” said Lesh-Laurie.

At the university, English is the language of instruction. However, students arriving from Arabic K-12 schools have a somewhat limited knowledge of English and often struggle with the curriculum at the beginning. “One constantly has interpretation problems. They usually spell phonetically and one has to say the words out loud four or five times before one understands the meaning.”

“Consequently, college courses in the UAE are often not at the same depth as in the United States. So it may take a UAE student six years to complete an equivalent baccalaureate degree.

However, a graduate degree measures up very well to a US degree because students have acquired English proficiency before they begin.”

In the oil-rich UAE, education is free. “The government pays for tuition, books and summer travel for educational purposes. The university has a program where the best students can compete to do their PhD in the West, all expenses paid. When the student returns home he owes the university the number of years for which he received support,” said Lesh-Laurie, adding: “I found this a very practical and exciting way for the university to grow its own faculty.”

Though the government seems awash in money, universities have to stand in line just as they do in the US. There are “no foundations” in the UAE to provide grants, so a handful of prominent families are the primary source of outside funding. “Unfortunately, also, salaries for existing faculty may stay the same throughout their tenure there, even when new faculty may start at a higher rate.”

In keeping with the culture, male and female undergraduates are educated separately. “Separate education is expensive. You need nearly twice the faculty,” said Lesh-Laurie. Or you need one instructor to function as two, which means that a segregated class has a live instructor for part of the year and a videotape of an instructor for the other part.

This is a solution for humanity courses, but not for engineering where students require more interaction with the instructor. Graduate classes are not segregated.

WOMEN IN PARTICULAR ARE EXPERIENCING A NEWFOUND FREEDOM THROUGH THEIR UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.

“A required internship for all students sends them out in the work world where they earn their own money and are independent of their family often for the first time,” said Lesh-Laurie. “And they like it—and so did the university.” Women in particular are experiencing newfound freedoms through their university education.

Female students outnumber the male population in all majors except engineering where the split is even. “A lot more women are getting educated each year and a lot more of them are seeking positions.”

Are there opportunities for UCD to work with Emirate institutions? “Yes, it would be a wonderful place to learn Arabic language and culture. I would recommend it be done with the national universities – there are three of them.”

Lesh-Laurie is not too optimistic that the changes she instituted at the UAE University will be sustained. The faculty and administrative staff “seemed to think I accomplished an enormous amount, but I think that I was only able to accomplish about 10 percent of what I hoped to be able to do.”

Would she do it again? “In a heartbeat. The job was tough and the frustration level was high, but the nicest thing about the UAE is the people; they are wonderful! They do wish to change, they’re simply not going to do it as quickly as some people would like,” said Lesh-Laure.

Inhibiting the UAE’s transition is its centuries-old culture. In a tribal society, power rests with a few families. One may marry one’s cousin, one may hire one’s brother.

“They truly want peace and a global society; they simply may not favor a US-style democracy.”

United Arab Emirates

Year established: 1971
Member states: Abu Dhabi, ‘Ajman, Al Fujayrah, Sharjah, Dubai, Umm al Quwayn, Ra’s al Khaymah
Population: 4,444,011 (2005 est)
Unemployment rate: 2.4% (2001)
Ethnic groups: Emirati 19%, other Arab and Iranian 23%, South Asian 50%, other expatriates (includes Westerners, East Asians) 8% (1982)
Religions: Muslim 96% (Shi’a 16%), other (includes Christian, Hindu) 4%
Languages: Arabic (official), Persian, English, Hindi, Urdu

Source: CIA World Factbook 2007