Who are the AHS Incoming Freshman Awardees?

Qatar Foundation International (QFI) provides funding for select Arabic Honor Society members who apply for the Incoming Freshman Award. This award is for graduating seniors who will continue to study Arabic during their first year of undergraduate studies. Award recipients are selected based on the strength of their application, including essay responses which give students a chance to demonstrate their passion for learning Arabic.

The 2021 awardees have finished their fall Arabic classes and reflect on their experiences. You can hear their stories below!

**Dakota Mendoza Lewis**

Dakota is a first-year student at New York University where she is taking courses in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies. She started learning Arabic in high school and was able to study abroad in Rabat, Morocco. During that summer experience, she says that “the world became far larger” than she had ever imagined. “Arabic was a gateway to new paths for my life,” Dakota writes. “In the past few years I have become more aware and [receptive] of the information brought to me about Arab culture, understanding [its] development as well as some of the religious influence it holds.” Studying Arabic also appeals to Dakota because she hopes to become a “global citizen” with understanding of other countries and customs around the world.

Thanks to the AHS Incoming Freshman Award, Dakota writes, “I was able to attend a school where my academic interests of Arabic and Middle Eastern Cultures are addressed and encouraged, centering the majority of my workload around those ideas.” She plans to study abroad at NYU’s Abu Dhabi Campus site and to continue developing her Arabic language skills with the hopes of becoming a diplomat or working in the global service field.
Madison Stein

Madison began learning Arabic through the Virtual Virginia program when she was 14 or 15. Her language classes sparked an interest in studying abroad, and she participated in the National Security Language Initiative for Youth program in Marrakesh, Morocco in the summer of 2017. Through that program, Madison enjoyed “in-depth conversations on a variety of topics, including politics, the education system, and familial and cultural expectations for daily conduct, marriage, and other milestones.” While her Arabic improved, she says that "the lessons I learned about how to learn about and respect other worldviews were what I took away from the program overall.”

Next, Madison took her language learning to the University of Arizona Arabic Flagship Program in 2018, and to the Qasid Institute in Amman, Jordan, from 2019 to 2020. Madison writes that the programs "were key in pushing me on my speaking and listening skills, as well as introducing me to many new topics in Arabic." But she was eager to learn more, so she enrolled in an Arabic short story class at Harvard University where she is now a student. Madison describes her experiences in her Arabic class this way:

“During the course, I read short stories by better-known (at least among English speakers) authors such as Tayeb Salih, Naguib Mahfouz, and Ghassan Kanafani while also researching and reading stories by authors such as Daisy Amir, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Ghada Samman. It was really interesting to see how certain themes reappeared across works, as well as compare the different writing styles. Though I am not majoring in literature, I believe reading works in the original languages is one important aspect of learning about other cultures."

Madison does not yet know what she wants to do after college, but she is interested in Middle Eastern history and politics, as well as Arabic literature.
Mary Catherine Wilson

“My first semester of college-level Arabic took longer to arrive than I initially expected when I was awarded the AHS Incoming Freshman Award in 2020,” Mary Catherine writes. When Smith College announced that classes would be virtual in 2020, Mary Catherine decided to take a year off. She says that she was nervous about enrolling in Intermediate Level Arabic in the fall of 2021 after her year-long hiatus from the language. But she adds that “the Arabic Honor Society award gave me some confidence, and I knew that I had the skills necessary to take on a higher level Arabic course.”

Mary Catherine was the only first-year in the course, and at first she was intimidated by her classmates’ confidence, comfort levels with each other, and language skills. She wanted more practice. So, she spoke with her Arabic professor about opportunities. She and her professor “worked together to set up a movie event, open to all students. In December, we watched the Saudi Arabian film Barakah meets Barakah—it was a hit, and we are planning more events for next semester.”

Mary Catherine also took a global poetry class in her school’s World Literature department, and she combined her interests in poetry and Arabic in a final project. “I decided to create a zine about the process of translating an Arabic poem by Egyptian writer Iman Mersal,” she writes.

“‘The Idea of Houses’ or ‘ فكرة البيوت’ was a poem I’d encountered before, in my senior year of high school... Returning to the piece as a more advanced student, I was able to more clearly understand its themes of home and the pain of leaving it behind. As a first-year in college, I resonated with Mersal's images of moving on from a home I once cherished, and looking towards an unfamiliar future.”

She is proud of her project and of all that she was able to accomplish in her first semester, and she looks forward to working as an Arabic tutor in the spring, studying abroad when able, and continuing her language and literature at Smith College.
Philippa Watts

Philippa is a first-year student at the University of Edinburgh. Although she had studied Arabic in high school, the rigor of her Arabic 1a course was at first surprising. The class was more conversation-based than others she had previously taken, and she worked hard both in and out of the classroom to improve her grammar and conjugation skills. Philippa writes, “Not only did we discuss, respond, and repeat in Modern Standard Arabic daily, but one day a week was reserved for conversation in dialect with particular emphasis on Levantine Arabic. This constant practice was essential for preparing for our end of term Arabic Oral Exam.” Despite the challenges, Philippa was motivated to study so that she could “converse, connect, and engage with others.”

Philippa especially appreciated her class’s emphasis on Levantine Arabic, because the Levant is “the region of the Arabic-speaking world which I am currently most interested in and could possibly see myself living or working in at some point in the future.” “Understanding dialect is key for [communication],” she adds.

After college, the “Arabic language and the culture of the Arab world remains a constant in my desired career trajectory,” Philippa writes. “I am eager to bridge cultural and linguistic boundaries through the exchange of ideas and objects and to create a world where we can learn from one another’s cultures and creative products.” She plans to study Arabic in Morocco over the summer and is excited to take more Arabic courses at the University of Edinburgh in the fall.
Kenna Jones – video AHS Incoming Freshman Awardee Video Study Arabic!

Kenna is an International Relations major and Arabic minor at University of Texas at Austin. The Arabic Honor Society chapter at her high school introduced her to Arabic in her sophomore year of high school, and she has studied the language ever since.

While reflecting on her semester of learning Arabic in college, Kenna says, “Studying Arabic at the University of Texas this year has really motivated me and invigorated me to continue to study Arabic throughout my time at college and after. I hope to use the skills that I have acquired and continue to acquire to work on international issues in the Middle East such as access to health care and environmental issues.”

Kenna encourages those who are considering studying Arabic to “100% go for it. As a native English speaker, it can be daunting because it is a very different language than we are used to seeing, but it is also so rewarding. Everyone I have met so far during my studying of Arabic has been so kind and welcoming and helpful, and there will be plenty of people and organizations like Arabic Honor Society there to help you along the way.”
Amirah Ibrahim – video AHS Incoming Freshman Awardee_Amirah Ibrahim!

Amirah studies Arabic at Northeastern University in Boston. She started learning Arabic though her local Masjid when she was five or six, and she continued studying Arabic at her high school. She lived in Egypt for over a year and picked up the Egyptian dialect, and she later spent a month in Morocco learning Darija. “With that experience,” she says, “I learned about the food, I learned about the culture, I learned about the language, and being able to know one specific dialect, Fusha, and then learning about Darija in a different country [enabled me to] pick it up fast...” Amirah says that she would not have known about the program or been able to study in Morocco without the Arabic Honor Society.

In Amirah’s senior year of high school, she became an Arabic TA and taught the language at her Masjid on the weekends. “I love the Arabic culture, I love Arabic, and I love just being able to speak with other people in different dialects,” she says. Now as a first year in college, she is pursuing Arabic with the hopes of obtaining a biliteracy seal.
Alicia is a first year studying Arabic at Harvard University. She was a leader of the Arabic Honor Society at her high school in Washington, DC, and helped organize movie nights, coffee gatherings, and other cultural events. She says that “not only did the Arabic Honor Society foster my interest in Arabic, they also helped me get interested in various summer programs” such as the NSLI-Y program in Amman, Jordan through the U.S. State Department.

As Alicia has continued her Arabic studies at Harvard, she says that she has found great community and loves her professors. She attends various events through the Middle East Studies program, including a weekly coffee gathering.

After college, Alicia hopes to use her Arabic to join the foreign service or do research for a humanitarian group. “I think that studying Arabic is a great opportunity, especially in college when you have access to great professors,” she says.

“To any potential students who would be studying Arabic in college,” she adds, “I would recommend that they... do some introspection about why they’re studying Arabic and really fall back on that and remind themselves of that whenever it gets hard... Remember how it opens doors to a very different culture that is fascinating and opens you to communicate with people that you otherwise may not [interact with]."
Anna Miller – video AHS Summer Scholar Awardee Video...Anna Miller!

Anna is a first-year student at the University of Michigan. She was the copresident of her AHS chapter in high school. “Arabic Honor Society was such a great resource for me in high school,” she says, “and I know that what I learned and how Arabic Honor Society shaped me will continue through college and after.” As copresident, Anna helped organize events and fundraisers, and she worked closely with the refugee community and Palestine Children's Relief Fund in Portland.

“Working with AHS and being a part of this community... was such a vital part of my high school career. I think I became a more well-rounded person from being a part of AHS because it provided opportunities for me to reach out into the community which I wouldn't have done otherwise. Arabic is such a special language, and I feel so grateful that I was able to take it in high school and have AHS as a resource.”

Anna adds that studying Arabic in high school helped her grow in confidence, was a great networking opportunity, and it enabled her to “be part of change in Portland and do my part to help people.”

“If you decide to take Arabic, it's hard. You have to work very hard... But taking Arabic shows that you are dedicated to your academics; you are dedicated to learning something new... You are pushing yourself when you take Arabic... I think pushing yourself in regards to language and in regards to your academics is so important, and Arabic really does that.” It's rewarding, too, she adds. “Arabic is just such a great language. It's such a great tool to have. It's very unique.”

To learn more about the 2022 AHS academic awards, please email arabichonorsociety@qfi.org.