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I Hear the Train A Comin'-An Interview with Rick Johnson

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Eventually it will adjoin the planned King Abdullah Economic City, another ambitious investment that is projected to create two million jobs. But that’s a ways off.

In 2010/11 KAUST will have 600-700 Masters and Ph.D. students from around the world — China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the US, Canada, Europe, Africa, the Mideast, and beyond. There’s a similarly diverse roster of faculty and researchers.

The university is focused on research in targeted areas relevant to economic development in Saudi Arabia. Functionally, the main organizational units aren’t traditional disciplinary departments but rather nine interdisciplinary research centers — Catalysis, Clean Combustion, Solar Energy, Water Desalination, Plant Stress Genomics, the Red Sea, Membranes, Geometric Modeling, and Computational Bioscience. A typical research center consists of 8-10 faculty members plus 40-50 graduate students, research scientists and engineers, post-docs, visiting researchers, and administrative and technical staff.

They’re supported by a number of core labs and facilities, such as the Shaheen supercomputer, a nanofabrication lab, and a visualization lab. What’s being built here is really quite ambitious.

A key piece of the puzzle is the research park that is springing up adjacent to the academic core of KAUST. There are already several buildings in place to provide office and lab space for companies that are working in collaboration with the research centers.

What was the state of KAUST as an institution when you got there?

I first saw KAUST in March 2009 when I was being recruited by Joe Branin to be the library’s assistant director for collections and services. Joe, who had been library director at Ohio State, was preparing to take over as KAUST’s library director that summer.

At that time KAUST was still a massive building site. When I visited, trucks and hardhats were racing this way and that. Construction cranes were everywhere. Tens of thousands of construction workers were laboring around the clock to ensure the university opened in September. It hardly seemed possible they’d make it.

The next time I saw KAUST was when I started work, a week after the official opening of the university in March 2009. The scene had been transformed into a glimmering modern university campus perched on high ground above a new community that houses faculty, researchers, students, and staff. It still seems inconceivable to me that just 1000 days earlier the site had been a quiet patch of surf and sand in the fishing village of Thuwal.
on. Those books at least made it look like a library when the doors opened.

Step-by-step we’re getting beyond those challenges and laying the groundwork for a modern, world-class library.

**How did you go about essentially building a library from scratch?**

While I tend to think of what my colleagues and I are doing as “building a library from scratch,” the truth is that the work of designing the building and picking out an opening day collection of e-resources predates us. The process was largely framed by the extraordinarily short development timeline. The first wave of resources was selected by mapping broad research goals to broad subjects the founders expected research to focus on.

We’re immersed now in the process of refining the collection so that it more closely matches research and teaching needs of the faculty. We’re also evaluating other needs of the KAUST community, such as management information resources. I should mention that KAUST Library is one of three libraries at KAUST — there’s also a public library and a school library serving the many families at KAUST. We developing close working relationships with these libraries to ensure we address the full range of needs and get the most from our investments.

We’re eager, however, to get beyond the basics of implementing critical systems and supplying scientists with journals, databases, and some books. In the coming months we’ll be talking with faculty about where the library might add value throughout the entire research process. Like many libraries today, we want to understand and cultivate our role in e-science. We don’t know yet where this conversation will take us, but we know it needs to occur.

“Knowledge management” was a recurring theme in Saudi Aramco’s early planning for the library. The term perhaps belies a corporate perspective, but the practices are mainly relevant at KAUST. However, while corporate KM programs tend to put up walls around information to keep it from competitors, we recognize that in our context sharing rather than confining research outputs often is the best way to leverage their value. This fall we’ll establish a repository in which to capture the institution’s digital assets, but of course that’s just the beginning.

**What were the most unexpected professional challenges you faced getting the library up and running?**

Well, it never dawned on me that buying and distributing textbooks would be part of our job in the library. But there was no other good option available to the university, so we volunteered to take on textbooks. Our User Education Librarian found herself reassigned to this challenging assignment from almost the moment she arrived at KAUST. She’s done a great job under trying circumstances.

Actually, acquiring printed books in general has been one of the big challenges we’ve faced. It’s cumbersome for us to procure them and time consuming to ship them into Saudi Arabia. So you might ask, why not just buy eBooks? All our journals are e-only and we’ve gotten not a single complaint. And we’ve bought tens of thousands of eBooks. But the feedback we’ve gotten from students — yes, students — is that they want their library to offer them printed books. As research is starting to confirm, eBooks aren’t entirely ready for prime time in the university setting.

One of the interesting things for me personally has been working in a library for the first time in my career. I spent 30 years working with libraries and for libraries, but never in a library. I was a little nervous about how that would work out. To be honest, there have been times I’ve wished I had more hands-on experience to draw on. But I’d like to think that I’m not weighed down by old solutions to new kinds of problems. Academic libraries today are complex, evolving organisms in a highly dynamic environment, so it’s probably more important today to grasp the strategic opportunities, organize to go after them, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes. That’s what I’m trying to bring to the show.

**How might the process of getting the library launched have been different if this had been a western institution?**

I don’t think distinctions of east or west have been a big factor for us. Although it has a diverse faculty, student body, and staff, KAUST is built on a western model. Our job has been simplified by the early decision to collect only English-language material, which makes sense for a science and technology institution. Everyone who comes to KAUST has English skills, so we’re able to communicate reasonably well.

In my experience, everyone has gone out of their way to be respectful of one another’s culture and perspective. For the most part, I think the kind of people who are attracted to working at KAUST are the kinds who thrive in this kind of melting pot.

**What were the most unexpected personal challenges you faced getting acclimated to life in Saudi Arabia?**

A number of the cultural strictures of Saudi Arabia don’t apply on the KAUST campus — for example, women and men study together, women needn’t wear the abaya if they don’t wish to, women can drive on campus. So I haven’t had the authentic Saudi immersion experience. At the same time, learning side by side with Saudi colleagues has afforded me an invaluable and rewarding opportunity to learn about Saudi and Arab culture more generally.

My biggest challenges aren’t what you might have expected. Instead they have more to do with navigating the inevitable bedlam of a new university, a new town, a new house, a new job, a new life. But these are universal challenges.