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On duty in Abu Dhabi

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by [Anna Sanders](#)

CAS senior Melissa Aragon is spending her last year as an undergraduate far away from Washington Square, her friends and the Silver Center — she and seven others are among the first NYU Abu Dhabi resident assistants.

NYUAD dean of students and associate vice chancellor for campus life, James Larimore, said while there are only eight RAs, that number will increase as the school's enrollment grows.

Larimore said the position is much the same at NYUAD as it is back at the Square, but Aragon said because of cultural differences NYUAD residence floors were separated by gender.

"The city of Abu Dhabi is different from New York City in many respects, and we have to adapt discussions about street smarts accordingly," Aragon said.

Though both NYU in New York and NYUAD have a zero-tolerance policy toward drugs and alcohol, at NYUAD, procedures for controlled substance abuse are much harsher.

"In this campus it's important to explain that proceedings involving controlled substances could lead to deportation and jail, something much more serious than a slap on the wrist from the dorm's [community development educator]," Aragon said.

NYUAD spokesman Josh Taylor said the university's RA training program covered both universal issues and those that dealt specifically with being new to Abu Dhabi's customs and cultures.

"This ranges from making sure that students understand that say, public displays of romantic affection are not considered appropriate, to making sure that they understand that there is zero tolerance for the use of illegal drugs," Taylor said.

"Given our location and the international diversity of the student body, RAs play a key role in facilitating intercultural communication and connections," Larimore said.

CAS junior and NYUAD RA Edward Withers agreed.

"We RAs all received significant training on how to facilitate conversation and interaction between students from remarkably different backgrounds," he said. "What has in fact been more tricky is the fact that there is such a small student body; issues like gossip and privacy are debated a lot by the residents themselves and how they can improve it, and we facilitate it."

Larimore explained the RAs are expected to take classes in Abu Dhabi, which would be counted as credit for their NYU degree.

"Each of the RAs worked with staff at NYU and NYU Abu Dhabi to put together individual study plans that include courses offered here for upper division credit and, when appropriate, directed study with Washington Square faculty in New York," he said.

"Directed study," Taylor explained, "means study that can be taken while away from Washington Square, although under the close supervision and guidance of a faculty member on the Square."

However, Aragon, a Middle Eastern and Islamic studies major, was able to incorporate classes at NYUAD to fit her degree from NYU.

"I'm also finishing up my last semester of Arabic through an independent study where I will have a more living experience of the language in day-to-day life than if I was in New York," she said.

Withers, who also has a minor in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, said though he could fill out his class schedule, the process was a little difficult.

"It was simply just a case of getting the classes approved to count toward my degree and major. Far easier said than done, but it worked out in the end," Withers said.

While course selection wasn't a factor in her decision to apply for an NYUAD RA position, Aragon was unsure about moving to a foreign country for such an extended time.

"I didn't know if I was ready to give up living in New York," Aragon said. "But what I love about being an RA here is that there's a true team spirit, and everyone I've worked with is excited to be here, and is working hard to make this new place a home, both for students and for ourselves."