

LEADERSHIP UNLOCKED

The Tala Alahmar Story

A former International President of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society details the journey from her war-torn home country to one of America's most prestigious graduate schools, and how a Michigan community college became the springboard for her academic success.

By Kali Woods

“IT FELT LIKE MY LIFE WAS OVER. ELECTRICITY, FAST WI-FI, and clean water became a privilege [...] And safety was measured by how close shotguns and bombs sounded.”

A pin drop could be heard as thousands of community college trustees sat captivated in their seats, mesmerized by the story of resilience shared by such a young woman. In 2022, Tala Alahmar took to the stage at the annual ACCT Leadership Congress in New York City to share the story of her journey from the Middle East to the United States. I recently caught up with her at a Phi Theta Kappa meeting and learned that there's more to her story than she could share in 2022.

A native of Syria, Alahmar recalled the eerie sounds of explosives detonating in her hometown of Damascus. She vividly described the gunshots that rang out across her middle school campus, standing paralyzed as teachers rushed her and her sixth-grade friends back inside. A few hours later, authorities confirmed one of her teachers had been shot by opposition groups right outside of her school.

The place she called home her entire life had become nearly

unrecognizable. But this terrifying encounter would lead Alahmar and her family to a new home thousands of miles away in the States.

Uprooted from the only place she'd ever known, Alahmar understood that her parents sought a better life for her in America. And even though the scenery around her was new, their core values remained the same. Education was always a top priority in the Alahmar household. As the daughter of two college graduates, Alahmar aspired to follow in her parents' footsteps and attend Damascus University in Syria. But as a new resident of the state of Michigan, she was forced to find an alternative path.

With little to no work experience or extracurricular activities listed on her resume, Alahmar made the decision to enroll at Oakland Community College (OCC). Her transition into college was challenging, as she struggled to get acclimated to her new home. She often found herself having to defend her decision to go the community college route after high school.

“[People] didn't think that community colleges [were] a quality



institution. Everyone made jokes about how easy the classes were and how everyone got high grades because there's not much expectation," Alahmar remembered.

Stigmatized by former classmates who had chosen four-year institutions, Alahmar hoped that her new school would provide the reassurance she was looking for. Unfortunately, she struggled to find community among her peers. As a new immigrant, she felt like she didn't fit in.

"I really isolated myself a lot. I didn't talk to anyone [...] I talked to my dad, and told him how much I wanted to go to Syria because even though I saw the diversity at my college, it was hard to go up and talk to people and feel like the stranger or the outsider," she said.

With so much time to herself, Alahmar became determined to prove her naysayers wrong. She homed in on her studies, emerging as a star student. And people began to take notice of her diligent work ethic. One of her professors who served as a faculty advisor for the Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society (PTK) chapter on campus pointed her out to the president of the organization. The president extended Alahmar an invitation to a chapter meeting. Little did she know that this one interaction would completely transform her college journey.

"One of the things that really changed my experience was one of my professors realizing the potential I had [...] Seeing that encouragement from a professor that had only just met me recently and had only seen me in class was very empowering and uplifting," she said.

Through PTK, Alahmar was able to work on impactful projects that addressed some of the community's biggest issues, and she also established long-lasting friendships with some of the brightest students at her school and across the globe. "I joined for the opportunities, and I ended up leaving with a family that's always there for me," Alahmar said of PTK. She grew in confidence, taking on leadership positions within her chapter. And by her senior year, she was appointed the International President of the global honor society, speaking to crowds of thousands about the same community college experience so many people told her she would grow to regret.

After three years at OCC, Alahmar's unquenchable thirst for knowledge, invaluable leadership experiences through PTK, and unwavering support from the staff and faculty inspired her to continue her academic journey beyond graduation. In 2021, Alahmar transferred to the University of Michigan, a school nearly twice as big as her old stomping grounds. And while excited about this amazing opportunity in front of her, her new reality came with a lot of changes.

"I remember it was my first class. It was statistics. I walked in, and there was this huge auditorium that could fit over 300 students. And I just missed the intimate environment [that] I had in my community college [and] the personalized attention that I could get from my professors," she said.

Overwhelmed and somewhat intimidated, Alahmar longed for the support of a close-knit community like the one she had established at OCC. But that small cohort feel she was so desperately seeking proved more difficult to find on a campus of more than 50,000 students.

"It was really nice to have a really tight group of friends... we were all going through the same process together. We understood the struggles, and we had each other to support. And I honestly really missed just walking into my administrator's office and going to say hi to my dean between classes. That's definitely something that I couldn't do in a university given the large institution."

The uneasiness that began to settle in made Alahmar question whether she truly belonged there. But she did not let that self-doubt consume her. She reflected on her journey to the university and realized all the tools OCC and PTK had equipped her with would enable her to thrive in any environment. Despite a rocky start, she began to establish roots at the university, excelling in her classes and establishing relationships through smaller study groups and clubs. And while she had finally found her footing, Alahmar made it a personal mission to help other community college graduates going through similar experiences. She became a transfer student ambassador at the University of Michigan, where she was able to help her peers navigate the student services departments and provide advice to anxious transfers. In 2023, Alahmar went on to attain her bachelor's degree in international/global studies.

Now, operating confidently in her ability to handle whatever challenges come her way, Alahmar made the move to the nation's capital, where she is currently pursuing a masters of arts in democracy and governance at Georgetown University. Alahmar says she has aspirations to work within the U.S. Department of State and is hoping to put her leadership skills to work by exploring careers in diplomacy and human rights advocacy. She has also found a way to give back to Phi Theta Kappa, the organization that changed her life, by taking on the role of a success coach. In her position, she shares her journey from Syria to grad school with students from historically underrepresented communities, guiding them through the benefits of PTK and encouraging membership.

Alahmar has achieved many accolades within the last few years, but she attributes much of her undergraduate and graduate successes to Oakland Community College, the institution that gave a timid immigrant from Syria the space to develop and grow into the global leader she was always meant to be.

"It's the degree that I'm proudest of because I know that I took those three years to not only start my education, but I was also able to gain access to so many opportunities," she said. "And I know that if I didn't have that strong foundation [...] I probably wouldn't have been able to succeed."



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