Resolution on the Retirement of Mohammed Alwan
Senior Lecturer of Arabic

On behalf of the Department of German, Russian, and Asian Languages and Literatures, and of Tufts University at large, it is my distinct honor to enter a resolution on the retirement of Dr. Mohammed Bakir Alwan for twenty-four years of notable service and contributions to our community.

Many are surprised to learn that this man who is so immersed in all things Arabic began his academic career with a Bachelor of Science in Engineering from the University of Manchester in 1957. Mohammed had excelled in mathematics and engineering, and was given a prestigious scholarship from the Iraqi government to study in England. While there, he realized that despite his talents in math, his true passions lay elsewhere. A few years later, he decided to move to the US to begin his master’s studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in comparative literature.

Since the early 1970s, Mohammed has been an active scholar in the field of Arabic literature whose diverse and unique research interests have ranged from pre-Islamic Arab culture with his 2010 publication ‘Beliefs of the Ancient Arabs’ to the medieval Mediterranean, with his translation of a contemporary Arabic historian’s study on a Crusader siege of Acre, to his work on modern Arabic fiction, and even crossing the Atlantic with an English-Arabic translation of a collection of Langston Hughes’ poetry.

Mohammed has held an impressive series of positions. After completing his PhD, he taught at Indiana as well as Georgetown and Harvard, some of the best Middle Eastern studies programs in the world. Despite Tufts’ excellent reputation for international studies, it did not have a long-established Arabic program when Mohammed began teaching here in 1988. For more than a decade, Mohammed was the Arabic program – the only faculty member to teach all of its language and culture courses, offering our students courses on topics less commonly explored at the undergraduate level such as the Arabian Nights or a literary investigation of the Quran. He also generously led and designed dozens of independent studies for students, making his course load among the highest on campus. During these years, he helped built the Program from scratch into one that is top-notch.

During his trips to Cairo and elsewhere in the region, Mohammed regularly hobnobbed with literary giants such as Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz, Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim, the Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish, and the Iraqi poet credited with developing Arabic free verse poetry, Nazik al-Mala’ika. Mohammed is just as well known and universally respected among American scholars of the Middle East who have been indebted to him for his guidance, mentorship, support, and inspiration in their own scholarly work. One will encounter his name in other scholarly works from Lila Abu-Lughod, an anthropologist who explored Bedouin poetry to Eric Davis’ work on Iraqi collective identity. Yet despite these contacts, Mohammed will still generously contribute his time and knowledge to our students, leading them in the words of Khalil Gibran to the “thresholds of their own minds.”

Mohammed has had an insatiable passion which still consumes him today: collecting rare manuscripts, works of Arabic literature and old photographs of the Middle East which he jokes has both brought him to and out of bankruptcy over the last 40 years. After a two-year long research fellowship in Egypt in the 1970s, he returned to the US with total of 5,000 separate
books and manuscripts on all topics from Islamic jurisprudence to medicine to magic. In fact, his private collection is among the largest, if not the largest and most comprehensive, in North America, parts of which he has exhibited around the US over the last 40 years. Tufts students and interested faculty have had the pleasure of exploring the seemingly endless bookshelves of his warehouse collection. Many scholarly visitors are stunned to come into contact with first editions of works they had read about and never thought they would encounter and touch with their own hands.

Mohammed has left an indelible mark on the Arabic Program and its faculty and a legacy we will strive very hard to uphold. As he settles into retirement, Mohammed continues to be active in publishing, and is submitting a book on the origins of Arabic poetry for publication in late 2012. His other forthcoming works include an encyclopedia on the Arab jinn, as well as extensive research on the 19th century Lebanese Ottoman scholar Ahmad Faris Shidyaq, one of the pioneers of modern Arabic literature. His greatest project and latest ambition brings him back to the point where he started his academic career, Ahmad Faris Shidyaq, his PhD dissertation topic. Mohammed is working to restore this intellectual’s mausoleum, damaged during the Lebanese Civil War and to establish a museum to house Shidyaq’s entire works, which Mohammed has spent his lifetime collecting and studying. Although we will miss him dearly, we will look forward to following and benefiting from his ongoing academic and scholarly work. We thank him for his devoted service, eagerness to share his vast knowledge, and kind, generous spirit.

*On behalf of the Department of German, Russian, and Asian Languages and Literatures, I ask that this resolution be added to the minutes of the faculty and that a copy be given to Professor Mohammed Alwan.*

Respectfully submitted,
Rana Abdul-Aziz
Lecturer of Arabic