

STUDENT LIFE  
WELCOMES A NEW  
HOME WHERE  
ORGANIZATIONS  
CREATE THE TIES  
THAT BIND THE OU  
EXPERIENCE.

By Tami Althoff

# A Place to Unite

**MOHAMMED ALAJMI**, a University of Oklahoma petroleum engineering senior from Oman, wasn't sure how he would acclimate when he came to the University of Oklahoma four years ago. Thankfully, he was introduced to OU Cousins, where he found community and acceptance right from the start.

"Without being a part of OU Cousins, my experience at OU would not be the same," Alajmi says. "I've made some of my best friends through this program who are from the U.S. and other countries. I have gotten to meet people from around the world in such a friendly environment."

OU Cousins is just one of 70 organizations advised by OU's Office of Student Life, a department within the Division of Student Affairs.

Quy Nguyen, director of Student Life and assistant dean of students, says Student Life offers more than just friendship and belonging for students like

Alajmi—it offers opportunities that bind students and alumni to the university, serving as a common thread connecting them to the OU experience.

Nguyen hopes Student Life's recent move to a renovated space encompassing the fourth floor of Oklahoma Memorial Union will open doors to even more opportunity by serving as a common area where students from all communities can unite, forge friendships, share resources and build culture and community together.

"Our philosophy is that we want students to be part of their communities, but also to recognize that there are other kinds of people. If we can show students that we can exist in a place together, work together, collaborate and build friendships, it will be a much more powerful collegiate experience," Nguyen says. "It also helps students become better prepared; they realize there is a bigger world out there."

Student Life also oversees the Campus Activities Council, Union Programming Board, Fraternity and Sorority Programs and Services, and Multicultural Programs and Services. Beneath the umbrellas of each organization are clubs and groups promoting

service, academics and culture. They also produce dozens of annual campus events enriching the OU student experience.

Some Student Life programs are relatively new. In fact, when OU Cousins started in 1996, it was among the first of its kind nationally.

OU Cousins fosters understanding, friendship and unity by pairing international and American students. They first meet at a matching party and get together monthly for social activities like Oklahoma City Thunder basketball games, hiking and bingo. The year culminates with a Western-themed barbecue.

"People who are so seemingly different from all over the world can come together, become friends and realize that there's more that makes them the same than different," Nguyen says. "OU was on the cutting edge of ensuring our students see themselves as part of this global world."

By contrast, he says, other student organizations like social fraternities and sororities have



TRAVIS CAPERTON

Native American culture is celebrated through dance and song at November's Indigenous People's Day on the south oval.



TRAVIS CAPERTON

Director of OU Student Life and Assistant Dean of Students Quy Nguyen.



SOPHIA ARMOURDIAN

OU international students participate in the 2023 Eve of Nations.



TRAVIS CAPERTON

Some 70 student organizations sponsor dozens of annual events through Student Life.



Students pause for a “first-day photo” during Howdy Week 2023.

The new Student Life center provides a common area for building community.



celebrated more than a centennial, as have Student Life events like OU Homecoming, Scandals and OU’s Spring Powwow—the longest student-run pow wow in the nation at 110 years old. These events have become some of OU’s most treasured traditions.

“You can really see their impact here over many decades,” he says. “For current students, these experiences are great ways to build community. Alumni get to come back and see events they may have been a part of, and even though everything may not look the same, it represents their connection to the university. I think that’s what is important for our office—we get to be the stewards of OU traditions.”

Riley Burr graduated from OU in 2021 with a language arts education degree. A member of Kappa Kappa Gamma, she served as a liaison to the Panhellenic Council and vice president of recruitment for OU Panhellenic. She is now a language arts teacher with Norman Public Schools.

“Representing and serving a role within Panhellenic showed

me the value of my voice and ability to be a leader among my peers,” Burr says. “Student Life allowed me to grow as a leader at OU and beyond. I use the leadership and speaking skills I acquired during my time with Kappa Kappa Gamma and OU Panhellenic every day as a teacher and coach. I’m confident, no matter who I speak to or how many people I speak to. I’m so grateful for all of those moments of growth.”

Nguyen says that kind of impact is happening all over campus.

“The work we do focuses on students, and students are making things happen,” he says. “It’s about student development. We’re lucky to have students who care about this campus, this community and about carrying on traditions,” he says. “They care about making OU a place where current students can thrive, prospective students can see themselves, and alumni can come back to be a part of traditions and still feel connected to the university.”

Nguyen says as students get familiar with their new home on the union’s fourth floor, he hopes to create an environment where they feel a sense of belonging outside the classroom experience.

“If students don’t feel like they are part of a place, they aren’t going to thrive,” he says. “We create places of belonging for students so they can be the best versions of themselves, so they can explore who they are and become who they’re supposed to be.

“I always tell students that we stand on the shoulders of giants. There are a lot of people who have come before and laid the foundation for us.

“OU has great alumni who are active, whether it’s giving of their time or their resources, so I think it’s really important for our students to understand that it’s all about giving back. We want students to know they are doing everything for a purpose, and whoever comes after them will continue that work.”

*Tami Althoff works for OU Online and the OU College of Professional and Continuing Studies.*