

2019

# Faraway Flix: Connecting to International Students through Film

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## Recommended Citation

Bohuski, L.M. "Faraway Flix: Connecting to International Students through Film." In *The Globalized Library: American Academic Libraries and International Students, Collections, and Practices*, edited by Lindsay Inge and Yelena Luckert, 75-83. Chicago, Illinois: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, 2019.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT



# Faraway Flix:

## Connecting to International Students through Film

Laura Bohuski

WKU has, at any given time, about 20,000 students enrolled in university programs across four campuses. WKU is a campus that is actively engaged in making international connections, so much so that its current vision statement asserts that WKU is “a leading American university with international reach.”<sup>1</sup> Western’s drive to establish and maintain international connections has been successful: of the 20,000 students currently attending WKU, 1,300 are international students from 70 seventy different countries.<sup>2</sup> With such a diverse student population, many of the departments at Western are actively engaged in developing programs to help connect our extensive international population with the rest of the student body. The library program that was developed out of this vision would become the film series called Faraway Flix.

### Development

In the early 2010s, the library at Western’s main campus was trying to develop a way to connect with the international student population. While many international students frequently visited the library to study, many of them were also student workers for the library. The director of the International Student Office, or the ISO, together with employees at the library, first attempted to put together a video representing the international student’s experiences in the library. This video was developed with the idea of attracting new international students to use the library, to make those students feel welcome, and to promote the library as another place on campus where the international student population could come and develop a relationship with the campus community.

Unfortunately, this video, when finished, did not convey the welcoming feeling that either the International Student Office or the library wished to express. The video, meant to invite the international students into the library and into the community, wound up feeling more like an advertisement or promotional video. The video was scrapped but

both the library and the International Student Office still wanted to make international students feel more comfortable on and connected to campus.

Even though the video failed, the idea of outreach through the medium of videos or film was still favored by both departments. The idea was then broached for an international film series. This proposal was backed from multiple sides because of the personal experience of the program's developers and from input from international students within the library. Most notably, one of the library staff members that spearheaded the development of the Faraway Flix program immigrated to the United States with her family. When dealing with her culture shock, films about her home country were comforting reminders of the culture she had left behind.

International students struggle with feeling disconnected from their community and their surroundings, even if other students from their country or ethnicity are in their program with them. The idea of a film program was appealing because, if developed correctly, the program could provide students with a feeling of home and an opportunity to share their culture with others. With these concepts in mind, the library created a committee of staff and faculty members from multiple departments, along with a representative from the International Student Office, with the thought of launching a new film program in the 2013–2014 school year.

The committee was drawn from three different departments to try and create a well-balanced committee. Since the library had initiated the idea and would be staffing the events, three to four members of the committee came from within different library departments. The other members of the committee were each drawn from different departments to help support the film series. The other members of the committee consist of one member from the film department to help with the film selections, one member from the International Student Office to help keep the committee up to date on the needs of the international students, and one committee member from the Student Activities Office (SAO) in a supporting role to make sure that the Faraway Flix event nights worked within the student activities events schedule—a total of about seven committee members at any given time.

In the beginning, one of the main purposes of the International Student Office was to supply the libraries with information about the demographics of the international student population—mainly, which countries were most heavily represented on campus. For WKU, these countries were Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and China. While the demographics helped the committee select which countries to choose films from initially, the library didn't want to limit themselves to showing films from the same three countries every year. Beyond wanting diversity in their film selections, the committee also wanted to be sure that the chosen films were comforting and welcoming to international students. This decision limited the type of film that the committee was willing to show, as both the library and the ISO did not want to hold viewings for films that focused on controversial topics, such as religion or politics.

For example, one of Western Kentucky's largest international student populations comes from Saudi Arabia, but this country is steeply divided along many different cultural, political, and religious lines. For these and other reasons, the Faraway Flix committee resolved early in their development that they wanted to choose films that were more about an aspect of culture or the society of the country described in the film. The committee decided to not show films that focused on high-tension issues, as these topics would likely bring tension into the international community present at the viewings instead of providing a safe and welcoming space. Because of this reasoning, in 2012 there were no films from Saudi Arabia that the committee was comfortable showing to the

campus community, even though students from Saudi Arabia are one of Western's largest international populations. Instead, they chose to show a Middle Eastern film called *Caramel* in the film series' second year to help represent an aspect of Middle Eastern culture while still maintaining a fun and welcoming atmosphere.

Once the committee had decided on what kind of films to show, it had to make other decisions on the series. The committee decided that one film per full semester month, or three films per semester, was a good disbursement of films, without draining too many resources from the committee members, the library, and the ISO. Other initial committee decisions included the decision to provide culturally or ethnically appropriate food as related to the film, that Friday nights were the best evenings on which to host the events, and the best location to show the films.

## 2013–2014 Academic Year: Year One

For the first year, the committee chose to show the following films: *A Simple Life* (China), *The Lives of Others* (Germany), *Kahaani* (India), *Whale Rider* (New Zealand), *A Separation* (Iran), and *First Grader* (Kenya). The first film in the series was chosen in part because of the large Chinese student population that existed at WKU. To continue to attract students in following years, and to give the committee time to find culturally appropriate films, movies for the other two large international populations were delayed for subsequent years. The film *Caramel*, from Lebanon, was shown in the 2014–2015 academic year as a look into aspects of Saudi Arabian culture until the committee found a film they were comfortable showing. Two years later, in the 2016–2017 academic year, *Wadjda* was a newly released Saudi Arabian film that the committee was finally able to comfortably show. A Brazilian film, *The Way He Looks*, was shown in the intervening 2015–2016 academic year and appealed to the other large international population on campus.

Another incentive the committee provided to attract domestic as well as international students to the event was the offer of free food. The choice to provide themed food for the students was not a difficult decision, though it proved difficult to execute. In the first year, funding for Faraway Flix was solely provided by the library and the International Student Office. With these budgetary restrictions, funds for food and other additions, such as door prizes, were scarce. So, in the first year of Faraway Flix, people on the committee or members of the international community who volunteered brought ethnically appropriate food to each of the six films. While bringing in food worked, it was also a bit disorganized and could be both time-consuming and expensive.

Providing food as part of the session also influenced where the films were to be screened. The committee wanted a space that was easily accessible, had both a comfortable atmosphere and comfortable seating, had the technology available to show a film (a projector and a film screen), allowed food, and was routinely available on a Friday night. While these restrictions might not seem like they would severely limit where these events could be held, there were very few spaces left to the committee that met all their requirements and did not require a fee to use.

Eventually, the committee was able to reserve the Faculty House, a wooden house that was formerly a student center and had now become a venue for a variety of WKU events. The building has a rustic, cozy charm and is stocked with chairs and couches that can be configured in a variety of ways. There is also technology available to project a movie and food is allowed inside the building. The only big issue with the space is the

problem of having to both arrange and breakdown the furniture for every event. Because the Faculty House is used consistently for events, the committee had to set up the chairs and couches at the beginning of the evening and then take them down before leaving, which added an hour to the time the committee had to spend at the events.

The main problems that Faraway Flix dealt with in its first year narrowed down to funding and working out issues that developed in the course of launching a new film series, including event location, the timing of food and the arrival of guest speakers, and making sure that the films shown were appropriate for the audience while being engaging enough so that students would attend and return. These were all issues that Faraway Flix faced during its first year and, to some extent, still face even now. Then, because of the creation of a campus-wide initiative during Faraway Flix's second year, some of these issues were mitigated or changed.

## 2014–2017: Year Two to Present

During Faraway Flix's first year, another program, as a part of international outreach and growth, was being launched. This program is known at Western as IYO or the International Year Of. The IYO website states that:

“The International Year Of... program is intended to provide the WKU campus and surrounding community with a rich, complex sense of place and interconnectedness through a year-long celebration of a single country. Throughout the school year, exploration of and interaction with the country occurs in multiple ways—including, but not limited to: enhanced course work featuring country-specific content; co-curricular activities; research projects; education abroad program offerings; visiting scholars, performers, and specialists; new institutional partnerships; campus and community events with a country-specific focus; cultural events, exhibits, and lectures.”<sup>3</sup>

This program is a part of Western's goal to be an internationally relevant and inclusive university, and it has encouraged and led to the development of many new and interesting events on WKU's campus each year.

With the initialization of the first IYO event series, the Faraway Flix committee decided that aligning their content with the International Year Of... could only improve Faraway Flix. When deciding on films for the 2014–2015 academic year, the committee decided that one of those films should come from Ecuador, the first International Year Of... country. The committee could apply for a grant from the IYO office to fund both the specific IYO film that year and to help support the rest of the series as the funds provided by the IYO grant had to be matched by departmental support. With these funds, along with those provided by the Student Activities Office, Faraway Flix could make some changes. The funds were used to support both a new food service for the film and more door prizes for the students.

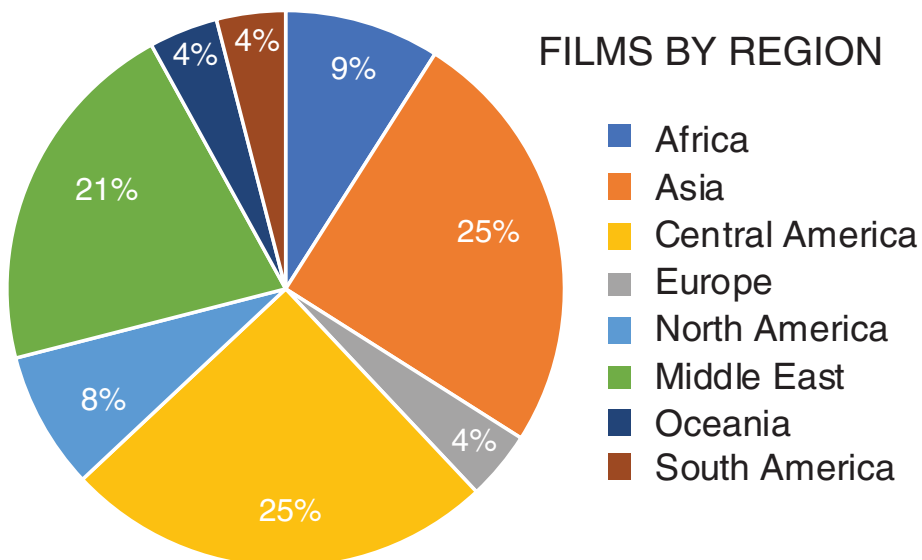
After receiving the grant from IYO, Faraway Flix could afford an agreement with Western's food vendor, Aramark. For every event, Aramark caters a selection of ethnically appropriate food; this lifted some of the time and monetary commitment from the committee members. This grant also freed up funds previously used to support the “catering” of the film events to improve the type of door prizes available to the students.

While some of the door prizes offered to students for attending these events were Western or community-specific, such as gift cards to local restaurants or WKU water bottles, with additional funds the committee could provide film and country-specific prizes as well. The larger prizes of the evening reflect the event itself by representing the two different aspects promoted by each event: film studies and international culture. The first door prize is a book. This book is usually about the film industry of the country or maybe the history of or the influences of film within the country being explored.

The second main door prize is a basket of food that comes from the represented country. The committee works carefully to select products made in or by the country to which the film corresponds. Because the budget is still low, around twenty-five to thirty dollars for each film including the cost of the book, getting a variety of products that match our specifications is sometimes difficult. Shopping at online outlets like Amazon or going to world markets both locally and in Nashville, Tennessee, helps us keep bringing in good door prizes while staying within budget.

Another change during this time was the room. The Faculty House, while providing a sufficient space to host the event, did have some problems. It took an hour for the committee to set up and break down the seating for the event, and though there were sofas and a few large comfy chairs, most of the seating was hard wooden chairs. Also, we had to continually bring a laptop to the room to show the film, even though there was a projector and a screen provided. The committee decided that if a better situation could be found, it would be useful to move the event and may attract more students if it was in a better location. Fortunately, one of our committee members is associated with the film department, which has a theater/auditorium room in Cherry Hall—one of the campus' original historical buildings that houses the English, History, and Film departments—that has built-in theater seating, allows food, and includes a projector, a DVD player, and a screen to show the film. The shift to this room reduced the strain on the committee members on event nights and made the event run smoother.

Over the course of this three-year span, 2014–2017, Faraway Flix aired eighteen films from eighteen different countries. Combined with the films from its first year, Faraway Flix has held twenty-four events over the course of four years. Each event has averaged



**Figure 8.1. Films by Region**

about twenty attendees, with some event participation as low as four (an outlier) and some as high as fifty. The following tables show a breakdown of the films chosen by region, country, and the number of attendees. Unfortunately, the attendance numbers for most of the first year's films are unavailable. *First Grader*, the Kenyan film, had an attendance of twenty-six people, and photos from other events show a similar attendance level, though no official counts exist.

**TABLE 8.1**  
**Faraway Flix Master List 2013–2017**

COUNTRY	FILM	# of Attendees	CONTINENT/ REGION
Kenya	<i>First Grader</i>	26	Africa
South Africa	<i>Tsotsi</i>	17	Africa
China	<i>A Simple Life</i>	[Unavailable]	Asia
India	<i>Kahaani</i>	[Unavailable]	Asia
Japan	<i>Dark Water</i>	29	Asia
Thailand	<i>Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives</i>	23	Asia
Philippines	<i>That Thing Called Tadhana</i>	16	Asia
South Korea	<i>A Brand New Life</i>	28	Asia
Ecuador	<i>Que Tan Lejos</i>	49	Central America
Czech Republic	<i>Autumn Spring</i>	20	Europe
Germany	<i>The Lives of Others</i>	[Unavailable]	Europe
France	<i>Une Hirondelle a Fait le Printemps</i>	11	Europe
Italy	<i>Suspiria</i>	37	Europe
Ireland	<i>Once</i>	28	Europe
Sweden	<i>The 100 Year Old Man</i>	15	Europe
Mexico/ Germany	<i>Guten Tag, Ramon</i>	4	Europe & North America
Iran	<i>A Separation</i>	[Unavailable]	Middle East
Lebanon	<i>Caramel</i>	15	Middle East
Saudi Arabi	<i>Wadjda</i>	28	Middle East
Iran	<i>A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night</i>	17	Middle East
Israel	<i>Footnote</i>	14	Middle East
Native America	<i>Smoke Signals</i>	18	North America
New Zealand	<i>Whale Rider</i>	[Unavailable]	Oceania
Brazil	<i>The Way He Looks</i>	36	South America

## Future

Going forward, Faraway Flix is facing some new challenges. Over the past few years, Kentucky has greatly reduced spending on higher education and the university is having to drastically reduce its extraneous spending. One of the programs taking a cut is Faraway Flix, and this means the committee will also lose the grant funding from IYO. As stated above, a committee or event can only apply for funding from the International Year Of... if there is a department that will match IYO's grant. Since the library can no longer provide funds to Faraway Flix, we cannot apply for the grant.

Without the grant and the library funds, the extras that Faraway Flix can provide are drastically reduced. There will be no more catered food brought by Aramark to the events, and if no other funding is received, it is possible that the food door prizes will have to be removed as well. Fortunately, the library may be willing to donate the film books for door prizes for each event instead of providing monetary funds.

To compensate for the lack of food and other funding, the committee has decided to provide popcorn at each event along with a reusable plastic cup. Each time a student comes to an event, they will get a sticker or mark on the cup. The people at the end of the year/semester with the most marks or stickers will be entered into a drawing for a grand door prize, which we hope to get with funds provided by the Student Activities Office, which has been a partner of Faraway Flix since its inaugural year.

## Running Faraway Flix

Committee work on Faraway Flix is generally light throughout the year. The first commitment is the six nights a year that committee members attend the film events, though consideration is given to personal schedules, and not all committee members are required to attend every event. Besides the event nights, the committee usually meets three to four times a year to discuss next year's movies and any new issues that might have arisen over the course of the academic year.

Early in the spring semester, the committee members meet to determine which countries the film series is going to highlight next year and which movies to select from those countries. Since the committee wants to provide a comforting environment for international students but also attract an audience for the events, the committee tries to pick recent films, typically nothing over ten years old and preferably nothing older than five years, if appropriate movies can be found. The only other requirement for these films, currently, is that these films should highlight a cultural theme.

It is the committee's responsibility to find and maintain contact with faculty and other campus community members to be able to find a speaker to come and talk about the international and cultural aspect of these films. Speakers have included faculty, staff, international students, as well as friends from the Bowling Green community. While this program is focused on both international and domestic students, WKU faculty, staff, and other members of the campus community are welcomed and encouraged to attend. On the other hand, while people from the community outside of Western can come to the event if they hear about the films from friends or colleagues, the library and the committee are not allowed to promote the event to the off-campus community to adhere to legal requirements.



Once the films have been chosen and the speakers contacted, then the other tasks for the committee are given out to individuals. The first task is to request that the WKU library order those films chosen for the following year, as the films become a part of Western's leisure film collection after they are used for the Faraway Flix events. Simultaneously, a different committee member is the contact for Aramark and orders the menus for each event and confirms that Aramark will be arriving the night of the event. Another two members oversee the acquisition of door prizes, ordering books from Amazon and going to local world grocery stores to buy the culturally appropriate foods. Other members go out to local restaurants and stores to see if they could provide door prizes for event nights. Overall, event nights make up the bulk of the committee work but they are also the best part.

## A Routine Event Night

A routine event night begins in the weeks before the event happens with the advertising of the event through email, digital and physical posters, and social media. The committee also sends a faculty-all email requesting that faculty members inform their students about the opportunity to view our film, as it is an event that can be counted for credit in some courses. Though we do not advertise outside of the Western community, we advertise through as many WKU avenues as possible.

On the night of the event, there is no longer much set up required by the committee members. With the change of location to the film room in Cherry Hall, the committee should arrive about half an hour before the set time of the event. This allows the members time to open the room, set up the door prizes, and set out slips for students to fill out to sign up for the door prizes. These slips also serve to create an email list for future Faraway Flix events. At the same time, Aramark is setting up the food outside of the room so that audience members can get a plate of food as they enter the room.

At the set start time of the event, the committee chair or another member introduces our speaker for the evening. The speaker then introduces the film and some topics for consideration for the audience to contemplate as they view the film. This introduction usually only lasts a few minutes, and then the film begins. It is after the film has ended that the main discussion begins. The duration and depth of the discussion depend entirely on the audience. The more audience members there are, the more engaged they are and the better the discussion. We also seem to have better discussions on the nights of the annual International Year Of... events. The reasons these discussions are better have not been extensively studied, though we do usually have more people at the IYO events than on other nights.

After the film and discussion are completed, the night ends quickly. Students are given the opportunity to swipe their cards through a swiper, or an identification reader, so that their participation in the event is recorded. There is some lingering discussion among the remaining audience members and the committee checks the room for any spare plates or food left behind. The room is locked up and Aramark returns to remove any leftover food. Overall, the events are easy to set up, not time-consuming, and can pull in anywhere from twenty to fifty audience members.

## Conclusion

Faraway Flix began in 2013 as a way to encourage international students to become more involved with the campus community and to give domestic students a look at cultures different from their own. Since its inception, Faraway Flix has grown through support from Western Kentucky University and is still a successful event series heading into its fifth year. As an educational event, with discussions about both the film and the country being represented, the films are free for viewing. The attraction of a free movie, food, and door prizes help bring students to the events, and the welcoming atmosphere brings back both international and domestic students. The time needed to plan and host these events is fairly low, with most of the time commitment limited to attending the six event nights. But with good food, good movies, and interesting discussions, these events are often a fun night out.

## Notes

1. "About WKU," the website for Western Kentucky University, last modified January 14, 2016, <http://www.wku.edu/about/>.
2. "International Enrollment Management," the website for Western Kentucky University, last modified February 15, 2017, <https://www.wku.edu/international/>.
3. "International Year Of..." the website for Western Kentucky University, last modified October 10, 2016, <http://www.wku.edu/iyo/aboutiyo.php>.

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