

## Inclusion and Safe-Spaces for Dialogue: Analysis of Muslim Students

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### Introduction

Islam is the world's second largest religion and the third largest religion in the U.S., yet college campuses are lacking adequate support to welcome Muslim students and make them feel safe (Hart 2016; Pew Research Center 2017; Shah 2017). At the same time, international students who identify as Muslims continue to enroll in U.S. higher education in increasingly numbers. If colleges truly value diversity and inclusion, they need to proactively address issues of marginalization and discriminations, and make efforts to transform institutional culture to be more inclusive. Through this paper, we seek to examine Muslim student experience on U.S. higher education campuses, identify the main challenges that this population faces, and provide specific policy and practice recommendations. In this project, we encountered a dearth of studies detailing how campuses can actually achieve both a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing and embodying their beliefs, as well as also creating a space for critical and heated debates where differences of opinion are challenged, defended, and respected. Through our research, we seek to explore the state of Muslim student experience on U.S. higher education campuses, identify the main challenges to this population feeling like the campus culture is inclusive, provide recommendations, and identify gaps in the literature for further research. Building on current research suggesting that a supportive campus culture impacts student confidence and resilience (Babbard and Singleton 2012), and that student experiences on-campus affect academic achievement and persistence (Museus 2014), we propose the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model as framework for campuses to build toward.

### Islamophobia, Hate Crimes on Campus, and College Persistence

Muslim students on college campuses have long been targets of hate crimes. In November 2015, a

student scrawled graffiti in a Virginia Tech restroom that stated: "I will be here 11/11/2015 to kill all Muslims." During the same month, anti-Muslim posters were found on the American University campus and three Muslim students were murdered in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Anti-Islamic sentiment has been magnified through the current administration of President Donald Trump, which often conflates mainstream Islam and extremism. The year 2015 also saw protests across college campuses in the U.S. focused on increasing racial equity and failure of institutions to respond sufficiently to racist incidents on campus. These protesters campaigned against university policies that protestors felt marginalized students of color. These protests resulted in the resignation of top administration at multiple institutions and conversations nationwide about the state of racial equity on campus, including the University of Missouri. However, this student-led movement often left out issues of Islamophobia and discrimination against international students. Even prior to the 2016 election, studies showed that Muslim students were highly misjudged and that Islamophobia in the U.S. significantly shaped public perceptions. Moreover, despite the hyper-visibility of Islam in public discourse and political propaganda, Muslim students on college campuses have received little attention in higher education research (Callaway 2010).

Looking at college persistence literature and graduation rates of Muslim students, there is a clear link between campus marginalization and lower levels of college persistence (Hart 2016; Shah 2017). Research shows that student experiences on-campus affect academic achievement and persistence (Museus 2014). It is also known that supportive campus culture impact student confidence and resilience (Babbard and Singleton 2012). Although conversations about campus culture are often framed through a racial lens, campus culture can be defined as "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of

individuals and groups in an institution of higher education” (Museus and Jayakumar 2012). These types of preconceived notions among many different cultures presents the opportunity for institutions in the U.S. and their educators to play a critical role in creating avenues for understanding multiple cross-cultural perspectives and assisting in the process of creating safe spaces for conversations. In this type of setting, students who engage in conversations around issues should be able to respectfully state their opinions and share their stories without the fear of being labeled as—in this case—an Islamophobe or a Muslim fundamentalist (Quaye and Chang 2012). In turn, Muslim students should be given the voice to correct misconceptions and be given the freedom to practice their identity as they chose to. Eventually, the goal is that this type of dialogue will also facilitate the creation of respectful student peer groups that are important for all students’ socialization (Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Recharde, Allen, and Milem 1968). Further, classrooms and campuses would be spaces that allow for multiple perspectives that expand beyond historical boundaries and definitions of difference (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Rhoads 1995; Stier 2004; West 2012).

### **Specific Factors to Consider in the Muslim Student Experience**

Research focusing on Muslim people has grown extensively in the last decade, and higher education research continues to identify solutions to cultural misunderstandings such as Islamophobia – a term used to describe negative perceptions of Muslims (Callaway 2010; Shah 2017). Past research suggested that Muslims feel invisible in U.S. society, however recent events in our current administration and in the media has increased their vulnerability to negative perceptions, assumptions and feelings of mistrust (Cole and Ahmadi 2010; Shah 2017). Islam is now the world’s second largest religion and the third largest religion in the U.S., yet college campuses continue to grapple with Muslim culture, religion, and obstacles they face, especially in a post-9/11 environment (Cole and Ahmadi 2010; Shah 2017). The current tensions concerning immigration and the Muslim community in larger society decreases the likelihood of college campuses feeling safe and comfortable for Muslim students.

#### **Religion**

The consideration of religious beliefs as a diversity variable that impacts institutional climate has been overlooked historically, but should be a key consideration for student achievement in higher education. For students who are religious, spiritual

integration is also a key to persistence (Morris, Beck, and Smith 2004). Herzig (2013) found that Muslim students in U.S. higher education institutions tend to be more religious than other minority groups on campus, and also utilize religious principles to cope with adversity. The importance of religion to Muslim students is an important factor to consider when addressing this group and one that higher education institutions are still struggling to grasp.

#### **Intersectionality of Racial Diversity and Religion**

Generally, conversations about campus culture are viewed through a racial lens. However, a more intersectional analysis of how religion intersects with race and nationality is necessary. Approximately 64 percent of Muslim Americans were born outside the U.S. as of 2010 (Cole and Ahmadi 2010). While many immigrants live in clustered communities where they may find others that share the culture from their home country, Muslims may find that difficult because they are arriving from 80 different countries (Cole and Ahmadi 2010).

#### **Prejudice**

Along with being an ethnic/national and religious minority, international Muslim students face greater problems of prejudice and obstacles toward assimilation than other marginalized groups (Seggie and Sanford 2010). Additionally, this population may be especially sensitive to isolation and exclusion because of the cultural insensitivity and unawareness of a campus (2010). Further, when Muslims are portrayed in popular American media, they are misrepresented with little content that helps debunk the myths associated with Islamophobia (McMurtie 2001).

#### **Campus Climate**

In framing our recommendations, we use the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model. Campus culture can be defined as “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education” (Museus and Jayakumar 2012, p. 31). There is a lack of research on how faculty and campuses can actually achieve both a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing and embodying their beliefs, while also creating a space for critical and heated debates where differences of opinion are challenged, defended, and respected. However, The CECE model suggests that more institutions foster and maintain culturally engaging campus environments, the

more likely their environments will allow their diverse student populations to thrive in college.

### Recommendations

Higher education leaders should look at the needs of this group of students and be able to better understand and support all students. The ability for Muslim students to comfortably represent their religious beliefs is an important factor to consider when addressing this group and one that higher education institutions are still struggling to understand. Moreover, institutions can achieve deep and pervasive transformational change by changing practices so that the religion of these students is better understood by their peers (Babbard and Singleton 2012).

In an increasingly globalized world in which students have greater options for post-secondary education, U.S. institutions must be more strategic in their treatment of historically marginalized religious groups. Accordingly, college campuses can work to create safe spaces to enable students to feel less isolated as well as for other students to openly express their beliefs. Creating safe spaces that support open dialogue can be beneficial in transforming a campus culture and nurturing meaningful conversation that both challenges and respects diverse beliefs.

#### *Campus Practices*

Utilizing the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model. We recommend that campuses should consider looking at campus programs and structures from the vantage point of the CECE model. The CECE model centers on students' access to culturally engaging campus environments being positively correlated with individual sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivation, expectation or intent to persist, and performance, which are related to greater likelihood that students will complete a degree program.

Below we highlight nine dimensions of CECE, with examples of initiatives that could be taken, encouraging individual institutions to consider these components and see how they may be able shift practices to map to these dimensions. We urge that leadership and individual academic united themselves engage deeply with this model to determine how it might work in each specific institutional landscape.

1. Cultural Familiarity: Campus spaces for students to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

- Ensure that there is Muslim faculty, staff and leadership rank identity representation.

- Ensure compositional diversity hiring so that diverse identities are well represented on campus.

- Create physical spaces on campus for prayer and community gatherings.

2. Culturally Relevant Knowledge: Provide opportunities for students to learn about their own cultural communities via culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular opportunities.

- Intentionally incorporate curriculum that touches on Muslim cultural and religious content across disciplines.

- Offer religious and culturally appropriate identity group specific programming on campus such as incorporating Muslim American experiences into celebrations of Latinx heritage.

3. Cultural Community Service: Provide opportunities for students to give back to and positively transform their home communities.

- Create partnerships and programs that engage students with communities they identify with. For example, opportunities for service in K-12 school programs for students who identify as Muslim.

4. Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement: Introduce programs and practices that facilitate educationally meaningful cross-cultural interactions among students that focus on solving real social and political problems.

- Provide opportunities for meaningful political activism or learning through courses by ensuring that instructors are preparing to facilitate tough conversations

- Sponsor and support events that engage students in current socio-political and social justice issues unfolding in the community and nationwide.

5. Cultural Validation: Build a campus culture that validate the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and identities of diverse students.

- Make sure that education campaigns such as reproductive health education includes intersections of religion in addition to race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.

- Only put faculty in the classroom who are able to validate diverse identities through extensive knowledge of student identities and learning styles

- Create on campus prayer space
- Center knowledge from and about student's identities in learning spaces.

#### *Cultural Responsiveness*

1. Collectivist Cultural Orientations: Create campuses cultures that emphasize a collectivist, rather than individualistic, cultural orientation that is characterized by teamwork and pursuit of mutual success.

- Create academic unit level IE plans to engage everyone in the effort to create a more inclusive campus.
- 2. Humanized Educational Environments: Ensure the availability of opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships with faculty and staff members who care about and are committed to their success.
  - Ensure that all Muslim students have access to an advocate on campus through an individualized faculty and staff advisor
  - Ensure all faculty are trained against bias
- 3. Proactive Philosophies: Incorporate philosophies that lead faculty, administrators, and staff to proactively bring important information, opportunities, and support services to students, rather than waiting for students to seek them out or hunt them down on their own.
  - Bring in the campus chaplain or Imam to talk directly to students to dispel prejudice.
  - Apply Universal Design of Instruction principles in student affairs to make sure that student affairs programs are accessible for religious students as well.
  - Create a bias incident reporting process, where students, faculty, and staff can go with go to share concerns, and is able to create educational moments and pull in resources from across the university and community for support as needed.
- 4. Holistic Support: Ensure students' access to at least one faculty or staff member that they are confident will provide the information they need, offer the help they seek, or connect them with the information or support that they require regardless of the problem or issue that they face.
  - Ensure that all students have access to an advocate on campus through an individualized faculty and staff advisor
  - Create opportunities for deep connection between academic department heads and students in their programs

### ***Safe Spaces and Inclusion for International Muslim Students***

#### ***Maintain Spaces for Debate***

After assessing the magnitude of Muslim student exclusion, many higher education policy makers and administrators might be tempted to develop a multicultural lens that ignores any problematic aspects of a worldview or of disagreements in belief systems between students. In doing so, these well-intentioned practitioners would be doing a disservice to their campuses because they would be excluding many people from a wider discourse (Turner et al. 2012).

Instead of hiding behind a banner of a value-blind multiculturalism at the expense of critical debate, practitioners should instead implement safe spaces for open discourse and healthy argument where diverse perspectives are both invited and validated (Turner et al., 2012). Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born American activist provides a unique example for what this looks like in a modern university context.

Hirsi Ali, an outspoken advocate for women's rights and a former Muslim herself, is often depicted as an Islamophobe in the media for her strong criticisms of Islam, particularly in regard to the subjugation of women supported by Islamic ideology that is adhered to in certain African and Middle Eastern countries (Gardels 2012). In April 2014, Brandeis University withdrew its invitation to Hirsi Ali to speak at the spring commencement ceremony because of student and faculty protests against her perceived Islamophobic viewpoints (Ayaan 2014). In an article titled "Here's What I Would Have Said at Brandeis," Hirsi Ali provided the Wall Street Journal with the abridged transcript of her planned speech. In this text, she cites many instances of violence sparked by Muslim ideology, including: the September 11 attack in New York City, the Boston Marathon bombings, and the recent Syrian civil war. Moreover, she emphasizes the role of Islam in perpetuating the oppression of women globally and offers the following events as examples: the increase in the practice of female genital mutilation in Saudi Arabia, the fact that 99 percent of women in Egypt reported facing sexual harassment, and the Iraqi legislation that lowered the legal age for child marriage to 9 for a girl (Ayaan 2014). In closing, Hirsi Ali called for a Muslim reformation, similar to the ones that Christianity and Judaism have experienced in the modern era, and parallels the goals of creating safe spaces. She explains that one of the best places for this type of reformation and evolution to happen is at institutions of higher learning (Ayaan 2014). She expresses the view that "We need to make our universities temples not of dogmatic orthodoxy, but of truly critical thinking, where all ideas are welcome and where civil debate is encouraged" (Ayaan 2014, p. 1) – meaning; there is no absolute truth defining current issues, and campuses and classrooms should welcome multiple perceptions that inform respectful discourse and to try and find understandings through compromise.

In the context of positive change in higher education, Hirsi Ali has unknowingly underscored the value of creating safe spaces for dialogue and debate. Although her assessment of Islam's role in oppression oversimplifies the intersection of religion and regional culture, she accurately underscores the necessity of a

student to define knowledge for himself or herself (Quaye and Chang 2012). If classrooms are to become more inclusive, they must be places where the climate is trustworthy and participants can freely engage in critical dialogue about all topics--including Islam (Quaye and Chang 2012). This practice is based on the implicit understanding that each individual student's knowledge is valid, so open debates and collective learning benefits the entire community of students in a classroom (Turner et al., 2012). Thus, administrators should encourage faculty to facilitate conversations that address Islam and Muslim student experience (Zolberg and Loon 1999). During this dialogue, it is important for faculty members to reinforce the idea that the goal is to openly engage with one another regarding topics that may cause discomfort (Quaye and Chang 2012). In this type of setting, students who engage in conversations around these issues should be able to respectfully state their opinions and share their stories without the fear of being labeled as an Islamophobe or a Muslim fundamentalist (Quaye and Chang 2012). Muslim students should be given the voice to correct misconceptions and be given the freedom to practice their identity as they chose to. Eventually, the goal is that this type of dialogue will also facilitate the creation of respectful student peer groups that are important for all students' socialization (Hurtado, et. al. 1998). In addition to faculty, other members of a campus community can foster positive change in higher education by creating safe spaces for debate and discussion outside of the classroom. Organization advisers for student groups, various deans and department heads, and support staff should also engage in critical discourse about Islam, religion, and what role it plays (or fails to play) in the culture of the institution. In these contexts, lack of knowledge, differing opinions, and sensitive topics can be discussed in a regulated environment that aims to include all (Turner et al. 2012). Muslim students can counter false stereotypes and share their expressions of faith while their non-Muslim peers can learn more about the topics that are relevant to adherents of the Muslim faith (Quaye and Chang 2012). Ultimately, the same safe-space creating methodology can be applied to discourses centered around any other faith or worldview as well because it achieves inclusion by deconstructing and silence and marginalization (Quaye and Chang 2012). By creating the opportunity and space for critical debate, colleges and universities in the United States can take measures to ensure that a genuine transformation based on diversity and inclusion of all students can take place on their campuses (Hurtado et al. 1998). This approach can achieve gradual transformation in the campus culture by focusing on

altering assumptions and behaviors, disrupting the influence of Islamaphobia, and fostering intentions of giving voice to all.

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