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## **How Funding Sources Affect Academic Experiences and Involvement: Gulf Arab International Students in the US Across the Disciplines**

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### **Abstract**

*This qualitative case study of female international students from Arab Gulf countries in the US explores participants' academic experiences in their graduate programs and focuses on how it was affected by their funding sources. Data were collected with participants during spring and summer semester in 2018 at a land-grant university in the Midwest US. Findings show that the interactions that participants had based on their funding (or lack thereof) affected their overall experience and involvement with campus and the extent to which they had access to campus involvement. The research finds that having an assistantship or not has some positive effects for some, has some negative effects for others, is a double-edged sword for some and quite unimportant to others. The degree to which participants' funding affected their experience was affected by how much experience through assistantships was common in their programs, options for gaining experience in their fields and integration on campus outside of assistantships, departmental contexts, and their long-term goals. Additionally, the role of discrimination in the campus involvement of students from marginalized identities is discussed.*

**Keywords:** graduate education, campus involvement, external funding, Arab Gulf, women

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## **Introduction**

Despite recent declines, Gulf Arab students have had a strong presence in American institutions of higher education, especially in English language programs, in the last decade. In the 2017-2018 academic year, Saudi Arabia was the 4th most common country-of-origin for international students in the US. Their presence in US institutions of higher education peaked in the 2015-2016 school year with over 61,000 students, but changes in their government scholarship program have led to a decline in Saudi Arabian students in the US in the last two years, with their numbers falling 45,000, a 15% decline in overall students from the year before. Kuwait, with just over 10,000 students, ranked 16th most common country-of-origin for the 2017-2018 school year, and their presence in American institutions of higher education is growing in a region where most other country's presence in the US is declining. Thus, Gulf Arab countries, and especially Saudi Arabia followed by Kuwait, remain prominent countries-of-origin for international students in the US.

Gulf Arab students often earn degrees abroad with funding from their governments or private universities in their home countries. This funding often does not require or allow students to work, and they must return to their home countries after earning degrees. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which started in 2005, funded Saudi Arabian citizens to study for 12-18 months in IEPs and undergraduate and graduate studies, including tuition, transportation, and a living stipend. However, recent changes to the KASP have led to declines in the overall Saudi Arabian population at US institutes of higher education. The total funding for the program was cut significantly, and remaining funds have been redirected to mostly graduate studies in selected fields and only at top 100 universities. The Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education offers a similar scholarship program to study in the US. Like the KASP, it covers one year of English language study and stipulates specific fields of study (MOHE). Private universities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf countries also have scholarship programs to fund their graduates to earn graduate degrees in the US and return to their institution as faculty members and researchers. Gulf Arab students may also earn Fulbright Scholarships or other funding to studying in the US. These funding sources require that students return to their home country after earning their degrees abroad, so most Gulf Arab students are temporary sojourners in the US or elsewhere while they complete their studies.

This research explores the role that funding source has on participants' experience on campus at a large, midwestern, land-grant university. The research used a qualitative case study methodology to collect data about participants' experiences on campus for an academic year and draws from interviews with student participants as well as with other stakeholders, participants' written academic work, and observations. The

study finds that multiple, overlapping factors of participants' experiences (e.g. departmental context, individual long-term goals) affect the degree to which their experience is shaped by their funding sources.

Hosting departments and institutions should recognize that Gulf Arab students, particularly (because of changes to the KASP) Saudi Arabians, will become more highly concentrated in specific departments and institutions where their external funding can affect their overall experience, involvement on campus, education, and development in their fields. Graduate assistantships (e.g. being a teaching assistant, research assistant, or working on campus in an administrative role) can be an essential part of graduate education in some fields at some institutions, so considering the effect of external funding has on education and involvement in the program and on campus is necessary in order to ensure all students have access to the education available in their departments and resources across campus. The implications of this study provide insights into these effects and how to support students who do not gain involvement and experience through funding sources that require them to work on campus and in their fields.

## **Literature Review**

### **Astin's Theory of Involvement**

Alexander Astin (1984) developed an involvement theory for university student development. According to his theory, student involvement in meaningful activities with the university leads to greater outcomes in terms of academic achievement and personal development. Astin (1984) defines involvement as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy the student invests in the academic experience" (p. 157). According to this theory, meaningful engagement with campus (e.g. participating in registered student organizations, being a research or teaching assistant, etc.) will impact students' overall academic experience. Positive interactions with the university can help make connections that benefit academics. While often applied to undergraduate students, this theory can also be salient for graduate students. When applied to international students, the cultural and language barrier to involvement could affect the degree to which many students believe themselves capable of, having access to, or desire to be involved with campus.

### **International Students in the US**

**Academics.** International student adjustment to academics in the US has been closely tied to language proficiency, and many consider English language skills to be an important aspect of academic adjustment to Anglophone universities (Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018; Cheng & Fox, 2008; Mori, 2000; Olivas & Li, 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Leong's (2015) study of issues faced by 11 international undergraduate students at a mid-

Atlantic university found that language barrier was an important issue for all aspects of life in the US. She writes, “a lack of full fluency of American English undermined the students’ ability to communicate with peers and others, occasionally leading to miscommunication and misunderstandings, as well as the inability to form friendships” (Leong, 2015, p. 464). Academically, this means that the participants must put in more time into readings and assignments than native speaking students. Participants reported feeling like they did not understand assignments well and that they did not feel confident in asking classmates or instructors for clarification, thus they were inhibited from building socioacademic networks.

***Gulf Arab Students.*** Research about Gulf Arab students’ issues with academics has demonstrated that they, particularly Saudi Arabian students, have a reputation for issues with English language (Alkubaidi, 2014; Hellmann, 2013; Mustafa, 2012), and particularly with writing and academic honesty violations (Hellmann, 2013; Madkhali, 2017; Razek, 2014). Compared to other international students studying the US, students from the Arab Gulf are more likely to arrive without English language skills proficient enough to enroll in degree programs (Institute of International Education, 2016). Thus, most Gulf Arab students begin their students in intensive English language programs before starting degree-seeking programs. Research on Gulf Arab students in degree-seeking programs has often centered around English language and writing. In Hellmann’s (2013) dissertation about Saudi Arabian graduate engineering students’ perceptions of writing, she held a focus group among instructors from the host institution’s English language program, and they agreed that Saudi Arabian students are weak in writing. One instructor says, “We expect that they will need help and lots of direct instruction with writing... I mean, really, they don’t write well, and we try to help them with that” (p. 72). Another said, “Writing is not easy for [Saudis]. That’s something I think we can all agree on” (p. 72). Razek (2014) found that a common strategy for overcoming these issues is receiving outside help on papers that can sometimes violate academic honesty policies. Additionally, Razek and Coyner’s (2014) article about Saudi Arabian student efficacy found that English teachers said that Saudi Arabian students do not socialize with non-Saudi Arabians and do not get involved on campus.

**Discrimination.** Throughout the literature about Arab and Muslim students in the US, feelings of isolation that resulted from discrimination are a consistent topic. In a qualitative study of veiled Muslim women at an American university, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) found that Muslim women feel isolated because others react to them with fear and suspicion, and this led them to withdraw from campus, which negatively affects their engagement and persistence. Students may also face discrimination and feel isolated through a perception of being silenced because of their identities or views (Garrod & Kilkenny, 2014; Salaita, 2006; Tabbah, Chung, & Miranda, 2016). Garrod and Kilkenny’s (2014) collection of narratives of Muslim students at

a US college includes a narrative that exemplifies this experience written by a Muslim international student who attended a lecture given by a former US intelligence officer about Middle Eastern history and US foreign policy. He asked the speaker what he would recommend to support democratization in Muslim countries, and the speaker responded that this was impossible because Islam and democracy cannot co-exist. The student wrote, “I sank into my seat, my stomach knotted with anger and confusion. I was so immobilized by his stinging implication that I could not be a true member of this democracy if I am a Muslim” (Garrod & Kilkenny, 2014, p. 73). He went on to explain that he feels that people question his loyalty to peace. This story is exemplary of many stories told by students in the reviewed literature.

While campus involvement is linked to positive academic and personal development outcomes (Astin, 1984), international students face many barriers (e.g., English language, cultural differences, the possibility of discrimination) when attempting to be involved with the wider campus community. For graduate students, funding sources through assistantships in students’ departments, whether they are teaching, working with faculty on research or in a lab, or administrative work, are an important gateway to campus involvement. Previous research about international graduate students on US campuses has not explored the relationship between funding sources and campus involvement.

## **Methods**

This paper is guided by the research question: What effect, if any, does funding source have on participants’ academic experience and involvement on campus? In order to explore this question, I used a qualitative case study design, which allows for a discussion of participants’ experience bounded in a particular location, time, and context. This article is derived from a larger study that considered participants’ general academic experience through semi-structured interviews, observations, and text analysis of their coursework. Through a holistic analysis of the data for the study, funding source was determined to be a significant factor in participants’ academic experiences and involvement on campus and in their departments.

## **Research Context**

The research site is a large, land-grant university in the US Midwest. The community is predominately a college town that is surrounded by rural areas. While the university has a large population of international students, Gulf Arab countries are not common countries-of-origins; therefore, there is not a large enclave of co-cultural or co-national students.

## **Participants**

Participant criteria required that all participants be female international graduate students from and educated in Arab Gulf countries who self-identify

as non-native speakers of English. All participants were considered international students as they were studying in the US on student visas. I recruited the participants initially through existing contacts who met the criteria and then through purposive snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007) via recruited participants. Institutional Review Board human subjects approval was obtained for this study. The following chart presents basic information about the six participants. All names are pseudonyms that were selected by the participants.

Table 1

*Participants' Basic Information*

Name	Country	Field, Level	Time in the US / Time in program	Previous Education	Funding source	Age
Noor	Bahrain	Linguistics, MA (plans for PhD)	6 months / 1 semester	BA Linguistics from Bahrain	Fulbright	24
Fiona	KSA, Jeddah	Nutrition, MA	3 years / 3 semesters	BA Nutrition from KSA	KASP	26
Nadia	Kuwait	Architecture, MA	7 years / 8 semesters	BA Civil Engineering from Kuwait	Self-funded (2 years) / TA (1 year)	28
Sema	KSA, Riyadh	Policy Economics, MS (admitted for PhD)	3 years / 3 semesters	BS in economics from KSA	KASP	26

### Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from several sources: semi-structured interviews with participants, observations of participants (e.g., while working or presenting academic work, socializing, or both), written work from participants' courses and thesis, researcher's notes, and semi-structured interviews with relevant instructors during spring and summer semesters in 2018.

I met with each participant at least five times and as many as more than ten times throughout the research period. I discussed at minimum the following topics with each participant: their personal backgrounds, their campus involvement, their academic experience, and their writing in their academic programs at the university. The following table summarizes the data collection with each participant.

Table 2  
*Data Sources by Participant*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Hours of Interviews</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Other</b>
Noor	9.5	Four course papers, one of which is the first draft of the thesis proposal	Teaching & social observations
Fiona	6.75	Four short (1-5 page) assignments, writing related to her volunteer research project	Lab observations (including with advisor), social observations (cinema, restaurants)
Nadia	4.25	n/a	Images of designs for contests and coursework
Sema	7.5	Three course papers (~20 pages each)	Social observations (cinema, restaurants, with her father)

### **Transcription and Data Analysis of Interview Transcripts**

I transcribed interview data personally and transcribed the participants' words exactly as they spoke them. The data presented is as it was spoken by the participants with minimal clarifications, which occur in brackets in the presentation of the data (e.g., if a participant said "I liked it better there," I replaced "there" with the specific location to which they referred, "I liked it better [in California]").

After individual and holistic readings of data, I coded interview transcripts first with deductive and then inductive coding as recommended by Saldaña (2013). Deductive coding was based on my working research questions and themes from previous research (e.g., English language proficiency, social connections, discrimination, help-seeking behaviors, etc.). After coding with deductive codes, I inductively coded the interviews following Tesch's eight steps of the emergent coding process, as described in Creswell (2014). In order to develop inductive codes, I again read all of the data holistically. Then, I returned to individual data sources and read them while asking myself the question, "what is this about?" and took notes about my answer in the margins. After doing this for multiple data sources, I made a list of all of the topics and organized consistent topics together, in order to develop what Saldaña (2013) calls "first cycle" coding. After making this list, I returned to the data to write the preliminary deductive and inductive codes from the list in the margins while looking for other themes or topics that have been left out of the preliminary list and added these new codes to the list, in order to develop what Saldaña (2013) calls "second cycle" coding. During this process, I found themes that were not often discussed in the reviewed literature (e.g., funding source).

Next, I brought together data with the same codes into a document and analyzed the data from multiple participants within the code. At this point, I assessed my coding scheme for inter-rater reliability with two colleagues. Because this coding process is iterative, I cycled through these steps multiple times to develop my final codes. Between iterations of code development, I cycled between coding on paper and coding in QDA Miner. Once the codes were finalized, I applied them to the data in QDA Miner, and I used its data analysis tools to continue to think about the data, including the frequency of codes and cross-codes and comparisons among participants.

## Results

All but one participant in this research received external funding for their graduate studies. This section will describe participants' perceptions of their experiences on campus. The following chart summarizes each participant's funding source and their requirements.

Table 3  
*Participants' Funding*

Name	Funding Source	Requirement
Noor	Fulbright Scholarship	Teaching two sections of beginning level Arabic, including planning, grading, office hours
Nadia	Teaching Assistant (internal)	Attend sessions / grade / hold office hours for 2 sections of architecture history
Fiona	KASP	n/a – expectation to return to the KSA
Sema	KASP	n/a – expectation to return to the KSA

### Noor

Noor, a Bahraini master's student in the Linguistics department, was funded with a Fulbright Scholarship that required her to teach two sections of Arabic language. The teaching requirement forced her to be involved and build relationships that she may not have otherwise developed. However, it was a large factor in her main challenge with adapting to life as a graduate student, time management. Her Fulbright Scholarship covered her tuition, provided a living stipend, and required that she return to Bahrain after graduation. This funding required her to teach two sections of beginning level Arabic with a total of 10 contact hours a week with her students. When I asked her if she felt that her teaching took up too much of her time, she answered,



“I love teaching Arabic!” Then, she paused and said, “It was hard in the beginning, but [teaching] makes [being here] better.” When I asked her what she loved about it, she said: “I like the feeling they give me, you know when they tell me that they like me or that I’m nice to them, something they don’t get from their other teachers, I like that.” She went on to add that she loves watching them go from knowing nothing about Arabic to writing a correct sentence in such a short time and knowing that she helped them make that possible.

Noor felt that her biggest challenge as a graduate student was a lack of time and that this challenge affected her work, academics, and social life. In a conversation about how she felt that she could only spend one day for each final paper, she said:

I feel like it wasn’t my fault that I was forced to write a final paper in a day. I stopped taking responsibility for that because I was actually busy all throughout the semester... It’s one of the things that I hate about here. Like back home, if you know you have a big expectation at the end of the semester like there is time for that like you have a few deadlines here and there and then you have big gaps where you can actually think of something else so if you leave it until the last minute, it’s on you. Here it’s not on me! Definitely not on me.

Noor was a first-year graduate student, living away from her family for the first time. She was also teaching credit hours as a first-year teacher with little formal teacher training. While she loved teaching, and it was her favorite part of being on campus, it was a major contributing factor to her issue of time management.

Of all the participants in this study, Noor was the newest to campus but the most involved and aware of campus life and culture, and her involvement was targeted towards Middle Eastern, Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim people and organizations. She had an opinion about the legacy of the university’s former mascot, while the other participants were unaware of this issue. She had an opinion about the graduate assistant strike that took place during data collection, while the other participants did not. A lot of her knowledge of campus events and culture came from daily interactions with her students, who were mostly Arab-American, but much also came through her interactions and close friendships with other Middle Eastern language teachers. Her best friends on campus were her office mates who taught Arabic or Farsi. Having thorough social networks and being engaged with several campus organizations (Arab Student Association, Muslim Student Association), Noor explained that all of her connections were with other Middle Eastern, Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim people by design. In her first semester, she grew to feel that engaging with domestic students was tiresome and fraught and that she “always felt that they wanted to argue with

me about where I was from but never wanted to listen to what I have to say.” The final straw, she told me, was a conversation with an American classmate who suggested that Noor, who did not wear a hijab in the US and dressed in all western-style clothes, was unwilling to wear a bikini because of where she was from not because of her own personal preference. She felt that this essentialized her to her region and not recognizing her individuality. This conversation came after many other similar ones, but she identifies it as the time that she decided that she was done trying to engage with peers who did not have personal experience living in the Middle East. Noor purposefully withdrew from social connections with people who made her feel the need to defend her home country and culture and instead focused her attention on Middle Eastern, Arab, Arab-American or Muslim friends in response to perceiving combativeness from others.

### **Nadia**

Nadia, a Kuwaiti master’s student in the Architecture department, was initially financially supported by her husband’s scholarship from a private university in Kuwait and paid for her own tuition but later became a teaching assistant in order to get a tuition waiver. She is the only participant who received internal funding. After several semesters of applying, she was selected to be a teaching assistant for an architecture history course. When I asked her why she wanted an assistantship, she told me that it was completely financial in order to have no longer pay her own tuition. She was not interested in the work experience and knowledge of her field that she could gain through this assistantship. “I didn’t want to be a TA. It’s time-consuming,” she said. Even though the experience was not her motivation, she still learned a lot from it. Her assistantship required her to attend lectures, grade exams, and hold office hours. At the end of the semester, with the perspective of being finished with her degree and being a TA, she said that being a TA helped her understand and think about the process through which students learn how to explain the history of design. However, because she is not interested in teaching, she did not feel that this insight was particularly useful for her.

Initially, in her first semester, though, her biggest concern about adjusting to life as a student in the US was English language. She said:

The first semester, I was really stressed out – it’s an American university, and everyone is going to speak English, and I’m not really good, I’m not sure, and then I realized, oh no, it’s so easy. I didn’t tell my whole family that I am studying, I just wanted to see and check myself, and if I’m doing well, I’m gonna tell them. And actually, I told everyone the second semester.

Overall, she felt that her undergraduate program in Kuwait was much more rigorous than her master’s program in the US. She did not engage much with her assistantship or the people (e.g. students, colleagues, her supervisor) and

saw it as a means to an end but did feel that it helped her develop new content knowledge in her field. Her biggest challenge was learning the necessary computer programs, and she felt that her assignments took up a lot of her time but that none of them were difficult. Nadia, who had two children since moving to the US, felt that any of her academic struggles were insignificant compared to her struggles raising two small children away from her family in Kuwait.

Overall, Nadia, who wore the hijab and dressed in all Kuwaiti clothes, felt that her department welcomed and accommodated her culture, and she perceived no discrimination in her department. In many ways, she felt like a cultural ambassador as the first Gulf Arab woman in her program, a role that she enjoyed. Nadia preferred to not shake hands with or otherwise touch men and to not be at events where alcohol is present, and she felt that being clear and communicating this to her professors and classmates eased any potential issues she may have had. At graduation, students shake hands with the dean as they receive their diplomas, but she went to the dean to tell him that she did not want to do that. She said that he was extremely friendly and happy to accommodate and even suggested practicing other ways to greet her in the diploma line. While she reported only positive experiences in her department, she told me many stories of friends in different departments and universities who felt that they had been discriminated against, and she expressed gratitude for her department's welcoming.

### **Fiona and Sema**

Fiona, a Saudi Arabian master's student in the Nutrition Department, and Sema, a Saudi Arabian master's student in the Economics department, were funded by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which pays their tuition and provides a living stipend. They were not required to work on campus, and both had little engagement on campus outside of their coursework. In one of our conversations towards the end of the year, Fiona told me that she was happy that she participated in my study because it finally gave her a chance to have a conversation with an American. Sema also told me that she had never talked with an American outside of English language instructors, faculty and staff on matters directly related to her courses. Neither attended any campus events outside of their programs and were only close friends with other single female Saudi Arabian graduate students. While much of their experience on campus was consistent, their departmental contexts were different, particularly the degree to which their classmates were also international students and also did not work on campus, which impacted the differences in their experiences.

Fiona's program had few international students, and most students had departmental funding that required them to work on campus. Fiona's advisor offered her the opportunity to volunteer in his lab on a new research project about teaching people with obesity how to manage the nutrition

aspects of their weight loss plans. There were no specific time commitments related to her volunteer work, but she sometimes was overwhelmed when responsibilities for the research project lined up with her exams. “Sometimes I think I am working too much, but then I am thankful for this opportunity to learn,” she said. All of her lab mates for this project were Arab PhD students who gave her advice that helped her prepare for her final oral exam, among other things. Her main issues in her graduate program were stress around cultural missteps (e.g., being reprimanded by a professor for using her first name, not knowing how to be formal in emails or how to politely make requests). She felt that her ‘foreigner’ mistakes (including English language issues) were noticeable in her department because most students were domestic.

In contrast, Sema was a student in a program with mostly international students, and, as a cost recovery program, all students were fee-paying, and none had internal funding. She felt that in her program, English language was not an issue for her because her English language skills were better than most students in her program. Her biggest academic struggle was with mathematics. After her first semester, she was put on academic probation, obtained a math tutor, and studied math hours every day. Her efforts paid off as she raised her GPA enough to be removed from probation and graduated on time.

Sema and Fiona both felt that they did not experience discrimination. Fiona, who did not wear a hijab, said, “no one can tell where I am from, so they don’t know when they should discriminate me” with a laugh. Sema, who sometimes wore a hijab and sometimes did not, felt that she received positive discrimination (e.g., people paying for her bill at cafes and restaurants) when she wore her hijab and none without it. In their daily lives, though, they did not have meaningful interactions with many people outside of similar identity dimensions from which to perceive discrimination.

## **Discussion**

The degree to which participants’ funding affected their involvement on campus and academic lives was affected by several factors: how much experience through assistantships was common in their programs, options for gaining experience outside of assistantships, the balance between domestic and international students, the degree to which the program was academic or professional, and their long-term goals.

### **Funding through Teaching Assistantships**

Having a teaching assistantship does not lead to one single outcome. The type of teaching assistantship (e.g. a single instructor of a small course vs. a grader who holds office hours for a large course) and the students’ interest in teaching are important factors in determining the effect that the

teaching assistantship has on the student. Noor and Nadia's funding required them to work on campus, which gave them experience and insights into their fields and campus that benefited their development in their fields and facilitated their involvement in their departments but also required their time. Noor's Fulbright Scholarship required her to teach two sections of beginning level Arabic language classes. This took a great deal of her time, but it also gave her access to rich social interactions and a sense of leadership and purpose. Noor spent a lot of time with her students, and class sizes were small and emphasized interaction, so her experience as a teacher has exposed her to aspects of undergraduate culture and life that the other participants were not. This position also connected her to other language teachers and forced her to be involved with Arabic language and cultural events on campus.

While teaching was a central part of Noor's experience on campus, the same is not true for Nadia, who studied for years without any funding prior to becoming a teaching assistant. Nadia had already established a social network of other Arab women and spent most of her time with her family prior to becoming a teaching assistant, and she maintained these social habits. Once she started the assistantship, she changed little about her interaction with campus other than to work her required hours. Noor's teaching assistantship required much more interaction between her and her students while Nadia's did not require much student interaction unless students came to her office hours.

Furthermore, their different goals with the teaching assistantships and longer-term goals affected how they saw their teaching assistantships. Noor wanted to teach Arabic, and she hopes to continue teaching Arabic and English once she returns to Bahrain. For Nadia, it was a means to an end rather than the goal itself, and she did not perceive the experience to have much impact beyond thinking more about undergraduate education in her field. Thus, having a teaching assistantship in one's department can affect a graduate student's experience on campus and facilitate their involvement, but this effect will depend on if the student perceives the experience as valuable and their interest in relationship building. Additionally, the type of course and the specific role of the assistantship are important factors.

### **External Funding without Work on Campus**

**King Abdullah Scholarship Program.** Without working in their departments or on campus, students do not automatically have an entry point into experience in their fields and relationships like those that come from formal involvement through work required from internal funding. Sema and Fiona are both funded by the KASP. While on campus, they had no assistantships or responsibilities outside of their academic work. The KASP requires reporting to the scholarship program, but there is little interaction unless the student faces significant problems. Neither of them was involved with campus activities outside of the classroom and made close friendships

only with other single female Gulf Arab students. Given the opportunity to volunteer, Fiona made social connections with PhD students in her field who were able to provide her with insights and advice that helped her with her academics. Not being involved with her department or campus through an assistantship made Fiona an outsider with her peers because most of her classmates had assistantships that provided experience and social connections in their field, but volunteering helped bridge this gap. For Sema, who was a student in a program that had mostly international students, all of whom did not have assistantships or work on campus, not working on campus did not separate her from her peers, but she did not make any social relationships with them and instead was surrounded by other women from her region who also did not work on campus.

### **Effect of Departmental Context**

Overall, the degree to which participants' funding affected their experience was affected by aspects of their department, namely how much experience through assistantships was common in their programs, options for gaining involvement outside of assistantships, the balance between domestic and international students, and the degree to which the program was academic or professional. In a department where most students have an assistantship, not having one can have a more pronounced impact than not having one in a department where most students also do not. In the Linguistics program, 72% of students have assistantships, mostly teaching language courses, which provide teaching experiences and practical insights into the field, so Noor would have stood out from her peers if she did not teach. Other students in Fiona's department, Nutrition, have research assistantships where they gain technical skills and research experience that she did not have the same access to. For Sema, however, this is not the case because she is in a cost recovery program, and none of her classmates have internal funding or work on campus.

The balance between domestic and international students in a department also impacted participants' experience on campus. Fiona felt that she and the mistakes that she made with language and culture stood out because most of her classmates were domestic and did not make such mistakes. Sema felt that being in a program with mostly international students helped her not stand out as she adapted because the program explicitly provided cultural information, and she was confident in her English language skills compared to her classmates. Noor in Linguistics and Nadia in Architecture did not report English language or cultural issues that had a negative impact on their experiences, and their departments were balanced between domestic and international students.

The degree to which a program is academic or professional, another important aspect of departmental context, also impacted participants' experience. Nadia (Architecture) and Sema (Economics) were in programs

that are more professional than the other participants' programs. Their programs emphasized technical skills and taught students how to use computer programs or statistical analysis, which is more straightforward than the learning required in a more academic field. For example, in Linguistics students must learn and operationalize debates over epistemology, how to make an argument appropriate for different audiences in the field, and more. Academic issues around learning technical skills can be different from academic issues around designing research.

### **Effect of Long-Term Goals**

The degree that not having an assistantship or gaining experience and involvement in their departments through assistantships is significant to each participant is also dependent on their long-term academic and professional goals. Sema was admitted to the PhD programs that she applied to but was not offered funding, and without any funding from the universities or her government, she was not able to enroll in any of the programs. Sema had no work experience in her field and may have been a more competitive applicant for funding with such experience. For Fiona, not gaining experience through assistantships was likely not significant because she will be competing for jobs with other Saudi Arabians who also likely did not gain experience through assistantships because they also had KASP funding.

For Noor and Nadia, who had teaching assistantships, the effect of the experience gained depended on their long-term goals. Noor aspired to teach Arabic and English language and linguistics, and her experience as an Arabic teaching assistant is significant because it is in-line with her long-term goals. Nadia hoped to work for a design firm, where her experience as a teaching assistant for architecture history courses is irrelevant. The effects of working or not working depending on participants' long-term goals and how potential work experience gained through assistantships are related to those goals.

### **Discrimination and Involvement**

This research highlights the relationship between campus involvement and discrimination. Fiona and Sema, who were not involved with non-Arab students beyond attending classes together, did not report perceived discrimination. Their lack of campus involvement is consistent with Razek and Coyner's (2014) findings that Saudi Arabian students do not become involved with campuses where they study. Noor was eager to build relationships with different people at first, but being involved with the general campus community exposed her to perceived discrimination. Specifically she perceived the people wanted to tell her about what is wrong with her home culture and put her in the position to defend it, which she found uncomfortable. Previous literature has found that wearing a hijab on US

campuses can be isolating and attract discrimination (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003), but this was not the case for the participants in this research. This could be, in part, because of the environment of the research setting and the political environment in the country at the time of data collection (e.g., the Muslim immigration ban was announced during data collection, and there was activism on campus against this policy, so domestic students could have been more motivated to support visibly Muslim students during data collection than at times when previous research was conducted). Nevertheless, this research shows that being more involved on campus gives more opportunities for students from marginalized identities to face discrimination and that they may find solace in social enclaves.

## **Conclusion**

Funding source or having or not having an assistantship was a complicated variable in participants' academic experience and overall involvement in their departments and on campus. It is a variable that has an impact, with pros and cons, depending on many other overlapping factors. It is not "bad" for Noor that she has to spend so many hours a week preparing for and teaching Arabic even though time is her biggest challenge. It is not "good" for other participants that they had more free time but gained less practical experience. The data reveals that having an assistantship or not has some positive effects for some, has some negative effects for others, is a double-edged sword for some, and quite unimportant to others. According to Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement, students who have meaningful participation with their departments and academics have more positive outcomes and more personal development. This research shows that students with external funding who are not involved with their departments or campus through assistantships may not have the same opportunity for academic achievement and development compared to their peers who are involved with campus through internal funding.

## **Recommendations**

In the context of departments where most students have internal funding, it is important to recognize the difference in experience between students who work on campus and students who do not. While teaching or research work may not be required in a program, instructors, faculty and advisors should consider the impact of a student who does not gain any experience or involvement through assistantships in departments where internal funding through assistantships is common. This is important both for students to gain experience in their fields but also for their involvement in their programs, which can facilitate positive academic outcomes. Offering experience through a volunteer opportunity, like Fiona's advisor offered her, or required practicums, are great ways for students to gain some experience and make connections without internal funding. Even when



it is not possible or desirable to offer volunteer opportunities, faculty and staff should understand that the experience of graduate education is different for students without work on campus when it is the norm in that department for students to work on campus. This factor may be relevant for counselors, students' instructors and advisors, students' department administrators, and staff to be able to understand students' experiences and integration. For departments where working on campus is common for graduate students, special efforts should be taken to help students who do not work on campus develop connections with classmates and faculty. In many cases, much of graduate education occurs outside of the formal classroom, so supporting students who do not have access to social networks and involvement through work experiences is necessary to promote equity of educational opportunities.

Discrimination should be acknowledged when promoting the involvement of students from minoritized races, religions, and other identity groups. If students feel that engaging with campus will be an opportunity to be discriminated against (as Noor did), they will withdraw from the general campus community. For many students, general integration on campus is not desirable. Thus the best practice of encouraging student engagement with as much of campus as possible is sometimes problematic. This highlights the important role of campus enclaves based on marginalized identity dimensions (e.g., organizations and centers based on religious, ethnic or racial, gender, and other identities as relevant). The absence of discrimination (as experienced by Fiona and Sema) is different from an integrative and friendly environment (as experienced by Nadia). While some students may enjoy educating their departments about their culture was (as Nadia did), not all students want to have the role of informal cultural ambassador, and their culture and preferences are not generalizable to other students from their region or country. While campus involvement has many positive outcomes, general involvement is not a cure-all for all students, and the potential to face discrimination should be considered when encouraging students to be involved.

Future research on the effect of funding within the same graduate program can help illuminate our understanding of how work on campus contributes to the overall experience as a graduate student. Because much varies from program to program, research that explores the experiences of students in the same program but with different funding sources and students who work on campus and students who do not, including international and domestic students, would contribute to the field's understanding of the relationship between funding and student experiences. Finally, while much research about international student experiences focuses on language issues, this research highlights the other kinds of issues that international students may have. While language and culture differences are important and overlap with many other factors that students experience, they are not the only issues that international students may face.

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