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We provide a brief overview of Muslim college students and the issues they face on campus. Specific practical suggestions are given on what student affairs professionals can do to combat hostility toward Islamic religious groups through the use of dialogue and to create safe spaces for Muslim students to engage in spiritual exploration.

Practical Suggestions to Accommodate the Needs of Muslim Students on Campus

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Within higher education, Muslim students face internal and external challenges to adherence to Islam. These students report feeling judged by others because of their religious affiliation (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). Many Muslim students report apprehension and discomfort in performing Islamic duties that are visible to the public, including prayer, fasting, modest dress, and nonconsumption of alcohol (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). A lack of accommodation for religious practices such as a safe space for prayer, meal accommodations, and acknowledgment of Islamic practices and holidays by administrators and professors can also be problematic for Muslim students (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006).

Given these challenges, it is important that student affairs practitioners find ways to assist Muslim students in their adherence to their religion as they pursue their degree. In this chapter, we present a brief introduction to Islamic tenets, discuss challenges facing Muslim college students, and offer practical strategies and suggestions for student affairs practitioners to better assist Muslim students. We conclude with a discussion of ways that student affairs practitioners can combat hostility toward the Islamic religion and Muslim students.

Introduction to Islam

The religion of Islam has an estimated 1 billion followers (called Muslims), making it the second largest religion in the world. Islam is growing in the United States and is soon projected to be the second largest faith group in the country. Currently there are approximately 6 to 8 million Muslims living in the United States (U.S. State Department, 2001). Muslims in the United States are a diverse group and are associated with various racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Arabs (26.2 percent), South Asians (24.7 percent), African Americans (23.8 percent), Caucasian and Native Americans (11 percent), Middle Eastern non-Arabs (10.3 percent), and East Asians (6.4 percent; U.S. State Department, 2001). It is estimated that approximately seventy-five thousand Muslim students are enrolled in American colleges and universities (Rossi, 2002).

Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion. *Islam* means “surrender,” and *Muslim* means “one who submits to the will of Allah.” Muslims use the word *Allah* to refer to the God of all humanity (Ali, Liu, and Humedian, 2004). The Qur’an is the holy book for Muslims and is believed to be the fundamental source of Islamic principles and values. There are two sects of Islam, Shia and Sunni, which resulted from disagreements in the late seventh century among Muslims regarding the religious and political leadership of the Islamic community. Although there are some differences between the two sects, the core beliefs of Islam are the same for both.

In Islam there are five articles of faith, commonly referred to as the five pillars of Islam: (1) *Iman* or faith (belief in One God), (2) prayer five times daily (*salat*), (3) *zakat* or charity, (4) *sawm* or fasting from sunrise to sunset for thirty days during the month of Ramadan, and (5) *hajj* or a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. Although the five pillars are the same for all Muslims, there is a wide variety of nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and different sects represented within Islam. There are also many differences in terms of the traditions and customs that are followed.

The Context of Islamophobia

In the United States, Islam has tended to be a religion that has not been well understood, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in an increase in the marginalization and discrimination of Muslims. The tragedy of 9/11 was unique in that an entire group of individuals, Muslims, were considered the perpetrators and an entire nation, which is majority Christian, was considered the victim. Therefore, the events of 9/11 sparked not only a political conflict but also a theological conflict.

While Islam was misunderstood prior to 9/11, the media coverage of the tragedies focused on the extreme differences between Muslims and Western traditions and religious beliefs. Although Muslims believe Islam is a continuation of Judaism and Christianity, the media and many high-

profile evangelical figureheads characterized Islam as a religion that is in considerable conflict with Christianity. In their characterization, they often exacerbated problems in understanding the religion of Islam and brought more attention to a minority of extremists while ignoring the voices of the majority of Muslims who do not adhere to extremist beliefs and behaviors (Takim, 2004).

After September 11, 2001, an increase in Islamophobia became an unfortunate reality for Muslims and those who resembled individuals from Muslim countries (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2007). The negative beliefs and perceptions about Islam and the Middle East caused individuals to retaliate against those who appeared to be the cause of the terrorist tragedies (Henderson and Sims, 2004). Hate crimes “have consisted of telephone, internet, mail, and face-to-face threats; minor assaults as well as assaults with dangerous weapons and assaults resulting in serious injury and death; and vandalism, shootings, arson and bombings directed at homes, businesses, and places of worship” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007).

Muslims on College Campuses. Muslims on college campuses are not immune to these personal threats and discrimination in spite of the pretense that most college campuses produce an environment tolerant of differences. Muslim students who have been victims of hate crimes suffer from significant physical, psychological, and emotional consequences. Threat to physical well-being is the most obvious negative consequence of hate crimes for victims; however, there are also significant psychological effects for victims. Victims of hate crimes have been shown to incur long-term posttraumatic stress disorder and need longer to recover from the incident than victims of crimes that were not motivated by bias and hate (Herek, Gillis, Cogan, and Glunt, 1997). Victims of hate crimes may also believe that all individuals who are of the perpetrators’ social group hold the same harmful intentions as the perpetrator (Henderson and Sloan, 2003).

Hate Crimes in the Classroom. Hate crimes are one way in which anti-Islamic sentiment has been manifested, but more subtle anti-Islamic sentiment may also be present in the classroom. Universities are hotbeds for debates concerning politics and religion. Many classes are focused exclusively on such topics, and the current political climate can make discussions in the classroom a difficult experience for Muslim students.

Although classroom discussions should be challenging and students have the right to express their beliefs and opinions, if such discussions are not monitored properly by professors, they can lead to the expression of ridicule and discrimination toward Muslims and Islam (Speck, 1997). Muslim students have also reported hesitance in correcting professors due to viewing the professor as an authority figure with power over their grades and class standing (Speck, 1997).

Anti-Islamic sentiment in the classroom can also contribute to feelings of isolation among Muslim students, especially if a student is the only Muslim in the class. The simple fact of being a minority in the classroom can

create an uncomfortable learning environment. In classes that discuss social, cultural, and religious topics, the potential for discrimination is always present.

Because Muslim students are typically a minority in classrooms, they often feel obligated to be representatives of their religion and culture (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). Representing an entire group of people and feeling responsible for disconfirming stereotypes can be a daunting task for students in the classroom.

Institutional Policies and Barriers to the Practice of Islam

One of the most apparent manifestations of Christian privilege in universities is the academic calendar. It is centered on Christian holidays and fails to recognize holidays of other faiths, including Islam. In Islam there are two holidays that are celebrated by all Muslims and other events that are considered holidays by some Muslims. Because universities in non-Islamic countries, such as the United States, do not officially recognize Islamic holidays, Muslim students struggle with the decision of fulfilling their academic responsibilities or observing their religious holidays. Such a decision can be a stressful and difficult experience for Muslim students who value both their academic obligations and their religious duties.

Another institutional barrier for practicing Islam on college campuses is lack of a safe space for prayer (Blumenfeld, 2006). Islamic prayer is a ritual that needs to be conducted five times a day at specific times. When safe and established places are not available, Muslim students have reported discomfort and anxiety from searching for a place to pray on campus (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). They feel that other students and faculty do not understand the process of Islamic prayer, and this makes praying in public spaces an uncomfortable experience for them (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). Another barrier to conducting prayer is when academic obligations, such as class or meetings, overlap with prayer times (Speck, 1997).

Dietary Restrictions. In Islam there are certain dietary restrictions that some Muslims strictly follow while others may not. These include the consumption of halal meat, which is slaughtered in the name of God, and prohibition against eating pork. For Muslim students who do adhere to the dietary restrictions, dining options on college campuses may not be adequate. Dining availability also becomes an issue for Muslim students during the month of Ramadan when they fast from sunrise to sunset, and dining hall schedules may not be accommodating.

Islam forbids the consumption of alcohol. Given that a source of entertainment on college campuses involves drinking, Muslims may feel socially isolated from their peers. They may also have very few choices in entertainment and social outlets.

Female Muslim Students. Female Muslim students may need additional support because of the issues they face in terms of cultural expectations and discrimination experiences. These students may need safe spaces to discuss their concerns about religious practice. An issue of particular significance for Muslim women on college campuses is that of choosing to wear the hijab (veil). There is not one universally accepted definition of hijab in Islam, which is why women who choose to wear the hijab may look different depending on their nationality and culture. In most instances, the hijab involves covering the hair with a veil and modest dress that covers most of the body.

Student affairs practitioners may be able to establish support groups for Muslim women who are struggling with issues concerning hijab, especially in dormitories or other student housing facilities. These groups may be able to bring together women from across campus to help them negotiate their religious identity and the ways in which they choose to express it. It may also strengthen their ability to provide information about this practice to the non-Muslim community.

Practical Suggestions

Student affairs practitioners can assist Muslim students in overcoming barriers to spiritual exploration and religious adherence in many ways. In addition, they can be instrumental in improving campus climate for Muslim students by directly addressing Islamophobia and misunderstandings between Muslim and non-Muslim students. We provide strategies for improving Muslim students' experiences, as well as the campus climate:

- One simple way that universities can create a climate conducive to religious adherence among Muslims students is to include Islamic religious holidays on the academic calendar. Although the holidays may not be officially recognized by the university, an alternate calendar with a description of the holidays can educate faculty and administrators on this topic. It is important that faculty and administrators show public support for Muslim students.
- Student affairs practitioners can create safe places for Muslim students to pray and hold services. Campuses across the United States have created student centers or provided available spaces to Muslim students for the purpose of religious gatherings and prayer (Eckstrom, 2000). Muslim students have found this to be a significant sign of support on behalf of their college community (Eckstrom, 2000) that leads to an improvement in morale and communicates to non-Muslim students an appreciation for religious diversity. It is also important to provide adequate accommodations for students to pray during the required prayer time. One way this might be accomplished is for college student practitioners to survey Muslim students on campus in order to investigate their specific needs for accommodation (Speck, 1997).

- Evaluate dining options and consider whether the dietary needs of Muslim students are being met. Dining hall accommodations include providing adequate nonpork meals, providing halal meat (kosher meat is acceptable), and adjusting the schedule during the month of Ramadan.
- Set up alcohol-free social experiences that might not only benefit Muslim students but attract other students who do not drink alcohol. A side benefit may be promotion of commonalities between Muslim students and other students who choose not to drink.
- Organize panel discussions and educational opportunities that open up for discussion the role of women in Islam and the role of hijab to help clear up misunderstandings and correct misinformation. Allowing non-Muslims to ask questions without fear of evaluation or defensiveness may directly address the concerns and biases that non-Muslim students have about the practice of hijab.

The following suggestions can assist student affairs practitioners to foster better relations among Muslim and non-Muslim students:

- Work directly with Muslim student associations to provide information to non-Muslim students. Panels and guest speakers are ways of providing information. However, simple exposure through social experiences may also go a long way in promoting an appreciation for diversity. Social experiences centered around the Islamic holidays can be organized in collaboration with these associations. These celebrations could be fun experiences that increase the casual contact of people of different faiths and improve relations between Muslim and non-Muslim groups.
- Sponsor a “fast for a day” event during the month of Ramadan in which students are encouraged to refrain from drinking and eating from sunrise to sunset for one day (this is the fasting that Muslims practice during the thirty-day period of Ramadan). After sunset, sponsor an *iftar*, the traditional evening meal for breaking the daily fast. *Iftar* is often done as a community, with Muslims gathering to break their fast together. The sponsorship of this event promotes an understanding of Islam and the practice of fasting that extends beyond lectures and panel discussions to promote an actual experience for non-Muslim students.
- Create safe dialogue. Most college campuses strive to educate students and encourage critical thinking about global and local events. Given the current political climate and world events, heated discussions about political issues that are intertwined with religious conflicts may be inevitable. These discussions, if not carefully handled, can lead to increased hostility between Muslim and non-Muslim students. Therefore, it is important to provide safe spaces for these discussions and ensure they are properly mediated.
- Train professors to manage difficult political and religious disagreements in class, especially classes where group discussion participation is one facet of grading criteria. Training should address educating faculty in how

to mediate discussions between Muslim and non-Muslim students and how to implement appropriate strategies to include Muslim students who may feel alienated in classroom discussions. These trainings can be offered through centers for teaching or international services.

- Dialogue and collaboration between Muslims and non-Muslims can be facilitated through student organizations. For example, encouraging various religious communities to participate in interfaith dialogues and social service projects can spark common ground between Muslims and other religious communities. Interfaith service projects in which two or more faith groups collaborate on a community-enhancing project are being practiced in a variety of settings and often take people from different religious backgrounds beyond discussions into social action. These interfaith groups can also serve as a safe space for Muslim students to find support and allies outside their own faith community.

Conclusion

Fostering a multicultural environment must be a priority for college campuses as their campuses become more diverse. In particular, with the current political and social climate, multicultural awareness surrounding Islam and the experiences of Muslim students has become increasingly important. Raising awareness and increasing knowledge is the first step; however, taking action is the most effective means by which campuses can become advocates for Muslim students. It is action that will provide evidence that the campus is committed to creating an environment that not only acknowledges and appreciates the diversity that Muslim students contribute to campus, but is also dedicated to ensuring that Muslim students are recognized as valued members of the campus community.

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