

Muslim Student Needs on U.S. Campuses

IMAGINE IF YOU WERE AN 18-YEAR-OLD getting off the plane at JFK Airport in New York, clutching a backpack with nervous hands, wondering if the officers at the Point of Entry would strip search you or put you in detention. You might wonder if a Muslim name would send the alarm bells ringing or if a student would be harassed or discriminated against, friends back home might say, "I told you so." Also, consider the fear etched in the hearts of the parents of students who may have sold property or given up their lifetime savings to have their child realize the dream of a world-class education, and how with bated breath they await news of their child reaching college safely.

This is what most young people and their families go through in the Muslim world if they are sending their children to the United States for higher education. The greatest damage that September 11, 2001, has done to the world is to instill a sense of insecurity and doubt in the minds of many people. As a result, societies are becoming insular and that can only give rise to alienation and further insecurity—a trend that must be avoided at all costs. This sense of alienation, whether it is self-imposed or a result of external factors, becomes part of the psyche of individuals or nations; this is what has happened in the Muslim world. When young Muslim students take the momentous decision to break out of this mold and seek quality education abroad, specifically in the United States, they carry with them traces of this feeling of insecurity and alienation, which is why it is extremely important that they are provided a "comfort zone" in their new environment. This "comfort zone," can be extended to students even before they arrive at U.S. campuses.

Though the needs of Muslim students, if they are spoken of as a group, are the same for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, it must be noted that where the graduate student has a greater level of maturity and ability to absorb changes, the student at the undergraduate level needs more assurance at times. To provide this assurance greater emphasis on the following measures might be useful to foreign student advisers.

Pre-Departure to the United States

Although the non-discrimination policy on the basis of race, gender, religion, etc. of colleges is printed on brochures included in university packages, it might be a good idea to emphasize this message in the admissions letter sent to students who have been accepted. Parents scrutinize this letter more than they do the I-20.

It would be useful to send information about Muslim life on campus, if possible with pictorial insertion of students at a mosque or celebrating *Eid*. This could be a segment of a brochure depicting religious diversity in the campus.

Establishing a volunteer mentoring program, an activity which is already being pursued by some U.S. universities, can be very effective in building a good rapport with Muslim students. Matching international Muslim students with U.S. student mentors of diverse faiths may create a kind of 'penpalship,' which is comforting for those who are going to a new place.

If students on campus who are from the same country as those of a new entrant are willing, it would be a good idea to provide their e-mail address to the incoming student. With this medium of communication, the new student can ask for advice on what to bring etc. The International Student Office can undertake the responsibility of finding home country volunteers for this service.

The above measures can also be initiated by the Muslim students association on college campuses if in-



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international offices don't choose to make such arrangements in advance of Muslim students arriving on campus. It is advisable for Muslim student associations on campuses to create a Web site, which many have already done on some campuses, so students can seek guidance about religious activities and needs as well as useful academic and social and cultural information before their arrival.

Upon Arrival at U.S. Campuses:

During fall orientation, giving a little more time to the topic of respect for different faiths while upholding the national belief in a secular-liberal environment would drive home the message of tolerance to students of all faiths to incoming Muslim students. To dispel misperceptions about Muslims being treated as an isolated group, it might be a good idea to use the services of a professional psychologist or counselor to deliver the initial welcome speech.

Specifically for students who are from the East (many being from Muslim states),

it would be advantageous to offer a lecture on U.S. culture to cover topics such as how the focus/interpretation of behavior/values may differ (e.g., no-host meals; for example, in the Muslim world it is considered rude not to offer to pay for friends if you ask them out). Muslim students also need to hear that the interpretation of certain terms may not be as they perceive them to be (e.g, the difference between 'friendly' and 'friendship')

Muslim Student Needs

Food

Muslim students are instructed to eat only *halal* meat, (i.e., meat from animals slaughtered according to Islamic specifications). When this option is unavailable, many Muslim students become vegetarian and many others tend to eat out at Muslim food restaurants, which can deplete their personal funds rapidly. Perhaps the most negative impact of unavailability of *halal* food in dorms is that Muslim students tend to get together to cook and eat. While this may seem like

a good solution it is, in fact, very damaging as far as social interaction is concerned. The meal table is an excellent venue to relax, converse, enjoy food, and make friends with other students. If this meeting takes place only with students of the Muslim faith exclusively two or three times a day restricts these students' social mobility and multicultural interaction. Because some campuses have made the gesture of providing Kosher food for Jewish students and offering vegetarian dishes for Hindu students and others who are vegetarians for personal reasons, it would make life easier and socially more beneficial for Muslim students to have *halal* food available in their dorms.

Prayer/Salaat

Muslims are required to offer their prayers five times daily. Most students accommodate the timings and are able to say their prayers either by combining them or keeping the class time margins in mind. To say these prayers, it is not obligatory to go to

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a mosque—any clean place or perhaps a prayer room set aside for this purpose would be appreciated by Muslim students. Some campuses have given Muslim students a strong sense of security to be able to pray openly. At the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, seeing Muslim students offer congregational prayers in the park is not an unfamiliar sight. For the major 'Eid' festivals prayers when students go to mosques, information about these services can be displayed on posters and on the Muslim Student Association's Web site. If the mosques are not nearby, the university could offer transportation (even at a nominal cost, it would be helpful to students).

Fasting in Ramadan

Muslim students are instructed to fast during the month of Ramadan. They need to eat just before sunrise and break their fast at sunset. Unlike in their home countries where they are able to get prepared food at *sahar*, the pre-sunrise meal, students have to either make their own arrangements or often prefer to go hungry for 24 hours since with their academic demands leave them too tired to make special preparations for the *sahar* meal. If it were possible to provide this service at

the dorm canteens, it would resolve a major issue for Muslim students. This service could also be arranged for and administered by the on-campus association for Muslim students if necessary. Another related issue with meals is that although some Muslim students do not take meals at campus dining halls during Ramadan, they are nonetheless charged for these meals. Perhaps university administrators need to review this issue, especially if there are many Muslim students enrolled at their institution.

Holidays for Major Muslim Festivals

The Muslim calendar enumerates many religious festivals; however, the two major festivals observed with much fervor in the Muslim world are the festivals of the two *Eids*: *Eid-ul-Fitr*, which is observed after Ramadan and *Eid-ul Azha*, which is observed after the Hajj. Muslims are obligated to congregate at mosques for the morning prayers, wish each other well, and share food. Most Muslim students can and do ask for holidays on this occasion and usually, they receive permission for this. But they do have to miss class and are required to catch up later. If universities would consider giving a general one day, or even half-day holiday to all students, like many do for Christian and Jewish religious holidays, it would not only be welcoming gesture to Muslim students, but it would also give students of other religious denominations a chance to share this festival with their Muslim friends and encourage greater understanding of another faith.

Other Needs and Concerns

Before their departure for the United States, some students have expressed concerns about being singled out about their dress code, such as wearing of the *hijab* or sporting a beard, but there have been no major incidents reported of these concerns being realized. But one matter that has been brought up by some female students is the issue of needing to reside in a women-only dorm, a facility that some universities may not be able to provide. A very positive initiative was re-

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ported from Stanford when a female Muslim student asked for and was provided alternative living arrangements suited to her needs. If explored, such initiatives to resolve other issues stemming from religious and cultural needs can boost Muslim student confidence and the universities' stated aim to attend to serious needs of its students.

Recognition of a 'National' Identity

Some people may view Muslims as a single homogenous entity. This may be so as far as the basic tenets of Islam are concerned, but where the Muslims are bound by their faith, they also differ in the interpretation of this faith and very importantly apart from their Muslim identity they value their 'national' identity with great patriotism. Muslim students will proclaim their national identity with much pride. An inside view of most dorm rooms will reveal that the national flag is displayed in a place of honor. It would be appreciated if these national sentiments are celebrated by the International Students Office. For example, Pennsylvania State University celebrates the national identity of its international students by putting their national flag on display for a few days, at the International Students Office; other campuses may have similar practices to celebrate the various ethnic backgrounds of its students.

The fact that a large number of Muslim students are opting for the United States as a preferred destination emphasizes the fact that even after the trauma of September 11 and its aftermath in the Muslim world, the reputation of U.S. universities as being premier institutions for quality education remains intact. Despite a sometimes lengthy visa process, most Muslim students keep the United States first on their list when considering their postsecondary education plans. There has been a drop in numbers compared to before September 11, but partly that is due to extensive marketing by other countries and also because of improved educational facilities in home countries.

Nowadays there is also the growing trend of U.S. colleges and other Western-style

higher education institutions to open branch campuses in the Muslim world. These branch campuses offer another option for Muslim students to obtain their undergraduate degrees. Branch campuses can attract students whose educational needs will be fulfilled in the comfort of their protected environment, which is a good option for Muslim students considering all of their educational choices. Nonetheless, efforts to expand the "comfort zone" at colleges in the United States would undoubtedly prove to make going abroad more attractive to Muslim students and enable them to experience a new world while enjoying the facilities extended to meet their religious, cultural, and social needs. Then coming to the United States for further education would help them feel more at home and perhaps this feeling of acceptance and familiarity might shorten the time required to adjust to living in the United States and therefore, help Muslims students' to excel in their academic pursuits, which is, after all, what the larger purpose of higher education is all about. **IE**

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NAFSA has two booklets designed to assist international students in adjusting to the United States.

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Guides international students through the culture of U.S. college classrooms by addressing a variety of topics including an overview of U.S. higher education, its academic structure and faculty roles, and the classroom itself.

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