

## Unfamiliar Student Culture Experience on Muslim Students

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Muslim students in American colleges, as a student subculture, do not only refer to international students who believe in the religion of Islam, but also count American students with the belief of Islam. There have been some research studied on Muslim students about their culture, social context, campus life and other different aspects. However, there are probably a significantly large number of students, faculty and staff members, including myself, having a very limited knowledge about this minority group on campus. I hope that we can know better and correct any improper mindset on Muslim students from the experience with this unfamiliar student culture in order to better understand them and enhance what we can do to improve their college experience.

Many people may think of the Middle East when they consider Muslims. However, the countries with the largest Muslim population are all in Asia, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Over fifty countries have Muslims as their majority populations (Callaway, 2010). On the campus of Arkansas Tech University, although the majority population of Muslim students is from Saudi Arabia, Muslim students also consist of some American students, and international students from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Pakistan. Not everyone in Saudi Arabia believes in Islam, but Saudi students at ATU do all have this religion.

Similar to other American colleges, Arkansas Tech University has the registered student organization for Saudi students. The International and Multicultural Student Services Office and the faculty advisor will supervise the election of executive board officers each year. The Saudi Students Club provides social collaboration for all of students from Saudi Arabia and increases the connection with other students on campus. It also serves and leads all one hundred and seventy-nine Saudi students at Arkansas Tech University currently with various informative

events, such as Saudi National Expo, the Saudi tent during the Wonder Week, and a 50 minute tour of Saudi Arabia to the whole community. The outcomes from membership include increasing the awareness and better knowledge of Saudi Arabia for the whole community and helping Saudi students feel more connected and involved on campus.

For the rest of Muslim students from other countries, they are able and welcome to join with Saudi students together on this campus to perform Islamic practice, including fasting and praying five times daily. Islamic Center of Russellville (ICR) was founded in August, 2014. It is the first Islamic center in Russellville and serves for Muslim students attending Arkansas Tech University and the Muslim-American families living in Russellville. There are nearly 200 Muslims benefiting from Islamic Center of Russellville. ICR opens to the whole community and aims to strengthen the bonds between Muslims and Non-Muslims by establishing a united community through working in harmony with other faith groups. On the open house day of ICR, ATU president, Dr. Bowen, also visited and showed her full support on ICR and Muslims in this community. Muslims need to pray five times a day at sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset and two hours after sunset. Most Muslims will come to pray at ICR in the afternoon to pray.

I visited one pray or Jumuah on a Friday afternoon. There were more than 70 people including students and professors gathered together to pray. Everyone would take their shoes off before entering the prayer room. A representative stood on a three-step-tall wooden piece, called a minbar. He would read scriptures from the Qur'an in Arabic first and then in English. While he was reading and singing scriptures, other people would pray. All of men gathered in the main prayer room, while women and little kids would pray in a smaller room next to it. The whole praying took almost 30 minutes long. Besides providing the mosque place for Muslims to pray, ICR also have other activities, such as Sunday school, festival celebration events, discussion

night, community services, graduation reception, new students welcome and orientation, cultural interaction, and kids play day.

After the pray, I interviewed with a few Saudi students at ICR. A female Saudi student answered me some questions regarding to the role of women in Saudi Arabia and in Islam. She explained the importance of wearing Hijab for Muslim women. Hijab is a scarf that Muslim women wear to cover their hair or face. Usually Muslim women cover their ears, neck, and chest with the same cloth. According to Islamic doctrines, Muslim women are allowed to wear a variety of styles of clothing in public as long as they dress modestly, which includes covering her legs and arms, wearing loose clothing, wearing the Hijab, and avoiding use of makeup. It is one of the Islamic guidelines as a preventative measure to keep people away from evil interaction between opposite genders. Having a relationship with someone of the opposite sex prior to marriage is not allowed in Islam. Other examples of these preventative actions include no attending dances or parties, no drinking or doing drugs, and no dating. The Islamic way of life keeps sexuality out of the public sphere. A woman's beauty is only for her spouse and for her marital relationship and she should be protected when going outside of the home (Rangoonwala et al, 2011).

World Hijab Day is on February 1st each year. International and Multicultural Student Services Office holds an event on this day to encourage both non-Hijabi Muslims and non-Muslim sisters to wear and experience Hijab for a day. I tried wearing a Hijab on that day this year, but I was surprised myself that I did not have enough courage to wear it to my classes. I was worried I would stand out in public and people may judge me on that. Then I asked this female Saudi student about her feeling to wear Hijab in public here. She said she felt comfortable here to wear it every day since it had become an important part of her life. Muslim women prefer

to wear Hijab because it is a part of their faith, and they feel liberated with what protects their modesty. I hope nobody on campus will judge on Muslim women based on their obvious dressing code.

Besides wearing a Hijab, women do not drive in Saudi Arabia. The female Saudi student explained to me that this social manner only appears in Saudi Arabia due to its own culture, not because of the Islam. That is why Saudi women here also choose not to drive although it is legal if they get the driver licenses. I think Muslim women do not share the equal right as men do in Islam proving as the acceptance of polygamy, the conservative dressing code for women, no eye contact with the opposite gender for women. However, most Muslim women think Islam have given women rights since over fourteen hundred years ago. They are happy with their equal reward, equal accountability, equal right to knowledge, and equal right to choose a spouse according to the religious doctrine. This feedback probably taught me how I should learn to understand and respect the different culture of other people. I did feel that respect and treasure Muslim men have for their women during the interview.

The president of Saudi Students Club confirmed the same response toward roles of women in Islam as well. He also addressed his opinion on how fairly he considered ATU faculty and staff members treat Muslim students from foreign countries on campus. He agreed that most people on campus would not judge them in a negative way and would like to know more about the group. However, he did see some faculties not behaving in a rational way. It was probably not only against Muslim students, but against the whole population of international students. He felt sad and angry about such a thing. International students may come from cultures where the classroom setting is more strict and different from the classroom setting in the United States. Another problem may be language limitations. Thus, international students who are Muslims

may not feel they have an adequate command of the language skill to raise objections to a professor when the professor introduced any misunderstanding about Islam or failed to accommodate students' religious practices in class (Speck, 1997). A good example of faculty's reaction to Islam would be a female American non-Muslim instructor here chose to wear Hijab just because she had lots of Saudi students in her classroom and she wanted them to feel comfortable in her class.

Although international students make up the majority of Muslim students population here, we do have a few American students with the belief of Islam. They tend to have more troubles than international students to get equal respect with their religious believe here because it is more difficult for people to understand the reason behind their region decision. It is challenging for them to fit into the Muslim group or playing roles in other groups with the aspect of Islam. They lack more support from the community. From decisions to wear or not wear Hijab, to fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, to informing people of Islam and Islamic practices, American Muslim students are facing a higher risk of being judged or misunderstood (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). If college campuses could show more encouragement and support to all Muslim students on campus, such as having more food options containing no pork in the cafeteria and promoting the knowledge of Islam, I believe Muslim students on this campus will be more grateful and successful.

Religion faith is an important aspect of identity for many students. It not only helps students connect to their spiritual believes, but also defines us in terms of our participation in practices within the context of our societies. Therefore, keeping the awareness of different identities of people from all faith traditions will make college campuses less alienating places for everyone and help more students succeed through their college life.

## References

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