International Muslim Students in the US: The Accountability of Educators

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Abstract—International Muslim students have been pursuing higher education in the US for decades. They choose the US for its renowned institutions of higher education and its welcoming attitude. However, today's geopolitical situation, in light of the 'travel ban' and the rhetoric (pre and post-election), has created unprecedented fear and concerns among Muslim students currently enrolled in US institutions as well as those outside the US who are debating whether to attend universities in the US. This article argues that globalization and crossing borders will persist, and there will always be Muslim students who are interested in furthering their education in the US. It also calls for more effort and support on the part of US institutions of higher education to ease Muslim students' international educational experience on their campuses as this will not only benefit these students but also their universities and the US at large.

Keywords— Cultural sensitivity training, inclusion, international Muslim students, racial discrimination, travel ban, US higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Cora Du Bois (1956), one of the earliest scholars to have documented the history of international students in the United States, the pursuit of learning beyond the boundaries of one's own community, nation, or culture is as old as learning itself...and reflects the ability of human beings to communicate with each other at varying levels and with varying sophistication across the barriers of social particularities (cited in Banjong & Olson, 2016, p. 5). International students have been coming to the United States to further their educations for decades. Over the years, the numbers have increased as more students from around the world choose the US for its renowned institutions of higher learning. In 2013, most of the world's 4.1 million international students were accommodated by the US (Zong & Batalove, 2016). During the 2015/2016 academic year, the number of international students in the US totaled 1,043,839 of which 108,227 came from Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Institute of International Education). This figure does not include those Muslim international students who came from other Muslim nations such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Turkey, and others.

The United States, under the Trump administration, changed its once welcoming attitude. President Trump's rhetoric pre-election set the tone for his administration when he said he wanted to see "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Johnson, 2015; see also Beinart, 2017; Blumberg, 2017). In fact, the leadership of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement the day after the 2016 election, citing widespread concern among faculty members that Trump's presidency could be the biggest threat to academics and their freedom since McCarthy's era (Ferguson, 2017, p. 4). Almost immediately following his election, Trump signed the initial executive travel ban order for seven mainly Muslim nations. That ban had far-reaching implications, affecting international students and scholars; some of whom were denied entry despite holding valid visas. Additionally, even though the original Muslim ban was blocked by the courts, US border agents still engage in discriminatory practices against Muslims from countries not even listed in the travel ban, including the UK and Canada (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. iii). In the midst of all the turmoil and confusion regarding the ban, the Trump administration

consistently denied that the ban was a ‘Muslim ban.’ Nonetheless, according to a report by Harvard Law School (2017), the initial travel ban was clearly intended to be a ‘Muslim ban,’ and the only reason that mentions of Islam were removed was an attempt to make the order appear legal (see also Bier, 2017). Colleges around the US warned international students, from the ‘banned’ nations, not to travel to their home countries for vacations or visits, because they worried those students might not be allowed back into the country (Hensley-Clancy, 2017). Students, who had tickets to travel home, cancelled their plans in light of the ban, and there were other students who ended up “trapped” outside the US during the initial ban and were unable to return to their institutions (Sultan, 2017).

International students, specifically Muslim students, are unsure of what awaits them if they try to attend university in the US. International students are nearly always marginal and often considered as outsiders; however, for Muslim students, specifically, their status as outsiders is often compounded by problems communicating, “immigration hostility,” and being judged or mistreated (Marginson, 2012, p. 506). In addition, in the midst of the travel ban, many Muslim students enrolled in US educational institutions claimed that they did not feel supported by their universities in the way they had hoped (Sultan, 2017).

Many international Muslim students discover that geopolitical issues are often personified by them, and they end up having to answer for Islam (see Irshad, 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Long, 2016; Sharp, 2011). Violence and discrimination may become progressively normalized when the socio-political atmosphere is charged with tension; this is particularly noticeable when government policy gives legitimacy to intolerant political opinions (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017, p. v). Furthermore, in many US institutions today, it appears that some students have the right to belong, but others are looked upon as being out of place (Hopkins, 2011; Lausch, Teman, & Perry, 2017). The negative coverage regarding Muslims in the media, combined with the current government’s policies towards them, discloses how certain parts of Muslim students’ university experiences are interlinked with “national and geopolitical landscapes” (Hopkins, 2011, p. 163). The impact of the travel ban has led to concern among Muslim international students currently in the US and for those Muslim students outside the US who are debating whether to attend universities in the US.

The US may see itself going back to the immediate post 9/11 situation, if the ban continues. At that time, stringent

new visa regulations and fear of repercussions as Muslims, led many students to go elsewhere. In addition, hundreds of Arab and Muslim students withdrew from their US institutions and returned to their home countries to avoid potential reprisals (McMurtie, 2001). Many of those students chose to go to Australia, Canada, the UK, New Zealand, or India (Urias & Yeakey, 2005). This situation could occur again, due to Trump’s rhetoric against foreigners (see Ramos, 2017; Rodriguez, 2018), specifically the ‘travel ban,’ resulting in a negative impact on college enrollment (see Steele-Figueroa, 2018).

Nonetheless, despite the Trump administration’s rhetoric, which leans toward an isolationist America (see Haberman, 2017), the world continues to transform. Today, cultures are connecting and interconnecting at a faster rate, while national borders have become porous and easier to cross; societies today are essentially “hybrid” (Torres, 2015, p. 28). Globalization and crossing borders persist because internationalization, empowered by advances in transportation and communication, is a consequence of globalization (Alfattal, 2016). As globalization continually pushes people across borders, there will always be Muslim students who are interested in furthering their education in the US. Due to this fact, US institutions of higher education need to be more aware of who their Muslim students are and what can be done to ease Muslim students’ international educational experiences.

II. WHO ARE MUSLIMS?

In the US, Islam and Muslims tend to be misunderstood. There are many misconceptions about Muslims, which lead to stereotypes and often conflict due to a lack of information. Part of the problem in the US is that the terms ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ are often used interchangeably, which is incorrect. Although most Arabs are Muslims, most Muslims are not Arabs. In fact, there are many Arab countries that have large non-Muslim populations, such as: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The fact is that most Muslims are not Arabs. There are about 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, but less than a quarter of Muslims are Arabs (Mirza & Bakali, 2010). The country with the most Muslims is Indonesia, followed by Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Turkey. With this backdrop, Muslim students arrive in the US and start out in a place of misunderstanding. Some US host institutions believe the stereotypes and the misinformation that is given about Muslims. When Muslim students arrive, they frequently feel alone and like outsiders, and often encounter difficult situations (see Faleel, Tam, Lee,

Har, & Foo, 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

III. NEGATIVE ENCOUNTERS

International students often run into a variety of negative concerns upon arrival. However, many of these problems are not just about difficulties with the language, but issues that arise due to the prejudice they encounter in the host society (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 388). In a study by Lee and Rice (2007) at a large US institution, many international students, including Muslims, acknowledged that they feel inferior, both because of how the media portrays them, and also from personal insults directed at them (p. 394). The study concluded that for international students, Americans can appear disinterested in learning or understanding about another culture, which can leave students feeling “culturally alienated” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 399). Research has shown that international students, in general, meet a variety of challenges. Problems commonly encountered by international Muslim students include loneliness and homesickness, financial stress, culture shock, discrimination or racism, and language difficulties, as well as anxiety and depression (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008; see also Faleel, et al., 2012; Lausch, et al., 2017; Rana, 2013). A 2008 study of 200 international students (Sawir, et al.) found that two-thirds of the interviewees experienced three kinds of loneliness: personal, social, and cultural (p. 151). The authors recommended that institutions assist these international students by offering them a variety of opportunities to create social bonding experiences between the international students and local students. Furthermore, they concluded that it was up to the educational authorities to consider blending Eastern and Western classroom practices (p. 153). Furthermore, Hopkins’ (2011) study of Muslim students found that geopolitical issues and national policies definitively shaped these students’ experiences on campus (p. 159). The Muslim students in his study felt that government policies had a negative impact on their daily experiences, by distorting their religion and treating them with suspicion (Hopkins, 2011, p. 166).

Many of these international students encounter incidents such as harassment, verbal abuse, or discrimination. Since these types of crimes are usually not punishable, racism can become the norm, but authorities may argue that anti-Muslim racism is not “sufficiently racist” for authorities to act upon (Rana, 2013, p. 57). Consequently, for Muslims living in the West, there is a real concern that Islamophobia is increasing (Mirza & Bakali, 2010, p. 62). The current

geopolitical climate is turning many Muslim students away from the US as their destination for higher education.

IV. ENROLLMENT DECLINE

It has become obvious that international student enrollment has declined in many US states since the travel ban (Steele-Figueroa, 2018). Higher education institutions were surveyed regarding international applicants for admission, and although initial results were mixed, 39% reported a drop, and the biggest decline, the survey found, was from students in the Middle East (Svrluga, 2017). In addition, a March 2017 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussing a recent survey of international high school students, found that about one third of the 2100 students surveyed indicated that they were less interested in attending US institutions, because of the current US political climate (Ellis, 2017). Almost half of all those who participated in the study indicated they were concerned about the possibility of discrimination (Ellis, 2017). They were also worried about visa restrictions, an additional travel ban, or a wall being built, all of which made them reconsider attending a US university. That study also found that students from the Middle East and North Africa had lost interest the most.

Overall, the travel ban caused major concerns especially for those students from majority Muslim countries. These students were very distressed by the first executive order and see the ban generally as a personal attack aimed at them (Svrluga, 2017). Furthermore, college recruiters have reported that students and their families have enormous apprehensions. They worry that international students are not really welcome in the US at this time, and that more visas will end up being denied to students. In addition, they have concerns that the travel ban might expand and include other countries, or perhaps be made permanent, all of which could make traveling to the US risky (Svrluga, 2017; see also Yakaboski, Perez-Velez, & Almutairi, 2017). This increased negativity towards Muslim students may have long term repercussions for the US, as these students bring many advantages to their host institutions and the country.

V. THE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO THE US

Beyond cultural diversity, international students contribute to the US economy and provide colleges with needed revenue. For example, during the 2014/2015 academic year, international students contributed \$30.8 billion to the US economy (Banjong & Olson, 2016), and with their expenses

from education, accommodation, dining, transportation, and health insurance, 37,338 jobs were created and supported during that academic year (NAFSA, 2015; see also Svrluga, 2017).

These students also offer competitiveness and scientific advancements to their institutions. A study carried out by Unruh (2015) at a US institution found that US faculty teaching international students agreed that these particular students are committed and focused, and they lean towards being more motivated and determined to succeed, than US students (p. 103). It was further established that international students often have better math and science skills than their US cohorts, and greater powers of analysis (Unruh, 2015). Additionally, international students tend to be attracted to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subject areas, which are highly valued by institutions of higher education, companies, and policymakers in the US, who try to find ways to keep these students in the country. These students are crucial to helping the US maintain its advances in technology and its global competitiveness (Banjong & Olson, 2016).

Students on F-1(student) visas, who hold qualifying degrees in STEM subjects, can apply for a two-year extension on their initial 12-month training period. In the academic year 2014/2015, nearly “half (44%) of international students were in a STEM field” and therefore eligible for practical training on an extended 36-month visa (Zong & Batalova, 2016). Following graduation and training, many international students remain in the US seeking jobs; this means that their acquired skills are then helping build the US economy (Banjong & Olson, 2016). However, the current policy changes regarding travel into the US, will have possible negative effects on the US (see Rodriguez, 2018). As reasoned by Svrluga (2017), if the US continues on this path, there is a real possibility that the best researchers will decide to go to other countries, leading to a breakdown in the many important collaborations which the US has been involved with that are imperative for expanding technological breakthroughs.

VI. WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW

In light of the many concerns Muslim students currently have about studying in the US, host institutions need to be more cognizant of the religious and cultural backgrounds of this particular group of students so that they can help them adjust and feel welcome. Unfortunately, some teachers in the US are not fully aware of, or perhaps prepared for managing, cultural diversity in their classrooms. Certainly, some take courses that

might help them deal with all cultures; however, overall there is often a sense that students come to America to learn about its culture and want to live like Americans. This is frequently not the case; students usually come to the US for the excellent reputations of its universities. In view of the more isolationist bent of America it becomes vital that teachers are aware of other cultures. It is incumbent upon teachers and professors to understand and address the concerns that international students, especially Muslims, will have when they arrive. In today’s America, it is important that teacher training include a mandatory pedagogical component on cultural sensitivity and inclusion. Encountering a new culture is always a challenge and one that must be met appropriately if people are to succeed in cross-cultural communication and especially so when the encounters are between students and teachers (Al-Issa, 2005). The academic world is an excellent setting for intercultural encounters and a place that allows for the building of bridges between those cultures; however, it can also be an environment, as pointed out by Fitch (1986), where some clashes become inevitable since teacher-student interaction is so deeply rooted in the culture of a society (Al-Issa, 2005).

The onus falls upon universities to ensure their educators and staff are trained to understand the importance of cultural sensitivity. Campus staff is often unaware of or unconcerned with the emotional and psychological dilemmas international students’ face, such as being homesick and feeling alienated (Lee & Rice, 2007). They will need to be able to work with US students and international students in classrooms where Muslims may be considered ‘outsiders’ and who may face a backlash from other students. It is for these reasons that university personnel, especially those in the classroom, be aware of the needs of all students, and be able to attend to their needs and to explain and share the cultural issues inherent in cross-cultural encounters. In addition, universities need to refrain from putting the emphasis on international students needing to “adapt” or “adjust,” because this relieves universities of any accountability, while placing the responsibility for change solely on the international students (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2009, p. 35). In the current geopolitical climate of the 21st century, institutions need to keep in mind how the Muslim world is portrayed in the West. Since the media images of Muslims are usually brief snapshots, which do not tell the whole story, it becomes mandatory for educators to be cognizant of this factor and help ensure that issues concerning or effecting Muslim students are addressed at the institutional level.

Without any specific training, teachers in higher education may have a sense of anxiety if they do not understand their students' culture. This could eventually lead to conflicts in the classroom, which long-term may interfere with learning (Kramsch, 1993). Teachers today need to develop intercultural communication competence (ICC) in order to be successful in culturally diverse classrooms. ICC simply refers to one's ability to communicate appropriately and effectively in intercultural interaction situations (see Chen & Starosta, 1998; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). Describing effective educators as culturally competent communicators, Le Roux (2002) writes:

Cultural competence...does not imply knowing everything about all different cultures. It is rather an active demonstration of respect for differences, an enthusiastic eagerness to learn about other cultures, an acceptance of different viewpoints on reality, and a flexibility and willingness to adjust, change, and re-orientate where required. (p. 43)

Improved skills of ICC such as empathy, respect, tolerance, willingness to learn about other cultures, appreciation and understanding of diverse world views and cultural patterns, sensitivity, and flexibility will have a great positive impact on communication among culturally diverse teachers and students in any teaching and learning context. Due to a lack of space in this article to discuss ICC at length, we advise readers to examine several excellent pieces that directly address ICC (see Alptekin, 2002; Bennett & Salonen, 2007; Byram, 1997; Le Roux, 2002; Protheroe & Barsdate, 1992; Thomas, 1997; Young & Sachdev, 2011). In addition, research on Cultural Pluralism Theory, which states that "each person has something of value to contribute to society, and that everyone should be viewed in an egalitarian mode rather than an inferior or superior mode" (Larke, 2013, p. 41) should be reflected in classroom interactions. In other words, instructors who value students also respect the backgrounds these students bring to the classroom including their: pasts, ancestors, languages, and cultures. In addition to developing ICC, there are a variety of specific matters that campuses can enact to ensure that Muslim students feel part of the campus community.

VII. WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO?

7.1 At the institutional level

There is a need for institutional accountability for international student satisfaction. US institutions need to be more aware that

"discrimination based on nation of origin exists in many forms" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 406). University administrations must develop guidelines that allow administrators and faculty to be cognizant of their personal obligation to ensure that international students are met with a welcoming and safe setting (Lee & Rice, 2007). In order for Muslim students to adjust and succeed in college, they require support and validation from not only faculty members, but also their peers and university staff (Andrade, 2009). In addition, institutions must strengthen their programs to foster more cooperation between local and international students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013, p. 98), since international students can benefit from structured collaborations with their peers. This can be arranged, for example, through peer-pairing programs (see Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). It is important for offices on campus to collaborate. Offices of international services should not have to shoulder the majority of Muslim students' needs. Faculty and staff who engage with these students also have a role to play (Mamiseishvili, 2012). Furthermore, institutions should emphasize the need for faculty commitment to engaging with undergraduates. Institutions can do this by encouraging their faculty members to be more hands on in ensuring local students develop more positive attitudes towards international students and interactions. This can be done by having faculty advise campus organizations and clubs to be more accepting and all-encompassing (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013, p. 98).

An important campus location for capitalizing on inclusiveness could be university newspapers. Campus newspapers and staff must be willing to report fairly on issues regarding Muslims and Islam. Rana (2013) argues that too often there is very little coverage regarding issues that are important to or related to Muslims, and that student newspaper reporters do not write as principled journalists, but only for student demand. University newspapers could include more stories about Muslim students, for example: recognition of awards, degrees, presentations, or achievements (Sherry, et al., 2009).

Margolis (2014) offers up useful 'how to' tips for developing and implementing lectures and film screenings regarding Islam and Muslims through the university library. Her article contains specific advice from how to expand the audience, to examples of the types of films and lectures that can be delivered under the library's auspices (see Margolis, 2014). Universities could also establish 'international students' week,' organize free seminars by Muslim students, faculty, or community members, and ensure that religious and

cultural holidays be recognized on university websites (Sherry, et al., 2009). There are many additional possibilities that can be utilized to help Muslim students feel more included on campus, while also allowing them to share their religion and culture with other students.

Campus policies need to be examined in view of how they affect Muslim international students. For example, how are hate crimes addressed? What does the university do about racial discrimination? By reviewing these policies, Rana (2013) contends that institutions may be able to give a voice to their international students by addressing campus social problems (p. 57). Often, the unfortunate take away from reviewing campus policy may signpost that not only is racism essentially normalized in US society, but on college campuses as well (Rana, 2013).

Overall, institutions must try to address Muslim students' needs in a variety of ways. This can be done by giving these students a higher profile on campus, improving cross-cultural understanding and acceptance, or by giving international students more chances to be involved both on campus and in their communities (Sherry, et al., 2009, p. 45). In addition to the need for the institutions as a whole to work with Muslim students, there are a variety of things faculty can do in order to make Muslim students feel more comfortable in the classroom.

7.2 At the classroom level

Within the classroom, it is incumbent upon educators to help their students increase their understanding of the world around them. This can be done by ensuring that students become critical thinkers about their world, and learn how to analyze the "social, political, and historical contexts in which they live" (Zaal, 2012, p. 557). In order for meaningful understanding to take place in the classroom, teachers of Muslim students need to grasp how complex Islam is in terms of the relationships that exist between Muslims, Islam, and their social practices (Rana, 2013, p. 52). This could be part of the cross-cultural intersection that could be taught or discussed with the class. Faculty can incorporate cultural diversity within their classrooms through the syllabus. For example, learning outcomes can be used to assimilate multicultural instructional issues and culturally responsive teaching (Larke, 2013, p. 44). This can lead to opportunities for both the instructor and class members to learn from Muslim students. By including their interests, or at times their hesitancy to participate in certain activities, the classroom can become a learning ground for more than just academic content. Students

can learn from their Muslim peers, why, for example, some might be hesitant to work in groups with the opposite gender. This would be an opportune time for the faculty member to allow a discussion on this issue, as a way to help US students understand the background and religion or cultural perceptions Muslim students may have about mixed gender encounters. Other activities can look at cultural differences in communication styles (verbal and nonverbal), cultural preferences for argumentation, ways of displaying respect, different cultural perceptions of the value of harmony and solidarity, the value of time, friendship, etc. (see Al-Issa, 2004, 2005).

It is important for faculty, when designing classroom activities or group work, to keep in mind those differences which can affect classroom interactions, such as students' gender, race, ethnicity, or class (Kramsch, 1993, p. 49). Classroom conflicts need to be spotted, analyzed, resolved and used as a learning opportunity for both teachers and students. Al-Issa (2005) developed a framework for understanding and analyzing cultural conflicts in the classroom. The framework, whose acronym is RELAX, follows five stages designed to help teachers and students work systematically towards the process of attaining appropriate levels of cultural competence to enable them to deal with and find solutions for conflicting situations. The five stages include: **R**aising cultural awareness, **E**xamining culturally conflicting incidents; **L**ooking at the conflict/what went wrong? **A**fter the analysis: now what?; **X**-citement: developing competence/I see. What the RELAX framework offers is an outline that teachers and Muslim international students in the classroom can use to help resolve, or minimize, cultural conflicts in the classroom.

However, beyond the classroom, faculty need to know more about the resources that are available on campus in order to help struggling international students (Unruh, 2015). There are a variety of places to which faculty can guide Muslim students including: counseling and testing centers, academic advising, the international office, writing centers, student support services, and tutoring services. In sum, both faculty and institutions can help meet their Muslim students' needs by becoming more cross-culturally sensitive (Brinton & Mano, 1994).

VIII. CONCLUSION

It is essential that universities try harder to ensure that all international students, and Muslim students as well, feel that they are appreciated, heard, and cared about. There is a great deal of fear and uncertainty among Muslim students due to the

travel ban. It is important for students to feel comfortable in the US and at their universities. Universities and colleges can do more to ensure that those Muslim students, who are currently enrolled, are given the assistance and input they require in order to help them feel that they are part of the campus community and campus life.

US institutions of higher learning have a significant job ahead of them in today's uncertain geopolitical situation. They must be prepared to handle possible conflicts arising on their campuses and in their classrooms. If these encounters involve Muslim students, in particular, and the institutions fail to address their needs, Muslim students may feel frustrated and disillusioned. It is therefore incumbent upon US institutions to ensure that their faculty and staff are all trained to understand cultures and differences, without relying on stereotypes. Teachers have an obligation to be prepared to teach students with backgrounds that are culturally different from their own, and to make sure that they develop intercultural competence. It has been established that university students are impacted by how deeply they establish connections in college; therefore, institutions should encourage strong and collaborative interactions between US and international [Muslim] students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013) both in and out of the classroom.

The academic world must free itself from rhetoric against any minority group in the US. This is the opportunity for universities and colleges to use their platforms to call for justice and equality for all people and ethnicities. The political rhetoric in America today needs to be understood, but it certainly should not be allowed to distract students, both foreign and local, from what their goal is in pursuing higher education and advancing their countries. Students are seeking knowledge, and the onus falls upon educators in institutions of higher education to continue contributing to the building of knowledge for the whole world.

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