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Muslim International Student and Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Students' Experiences Against a Backdrop of Islamophobia

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**MUSLIM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES
AGAINST A BACKDROP OF ISLAMOPHOBIA**

by

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A DISSERTATION

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Requirements for the Degree of

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(in Education)

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The University of Maine

May 2018

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Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Sandra Caron

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
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International student enrollment at institutions of higher education in the United States continues to rise. Despite political and social tensions, students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) nations continue to enroll in record numbers, yet there is minimal literature focused on the experiences of this sub-group of international students.

This qualitative study sought to understand the lived-experiences and perceived needs of Muslim International students from Middle East and North Africa nations enrolled in an institution of higher education in the northeast United States. This study employed a phenomenological approach to discovery aimed to develop new understandings of their lived experiences and perceived needs through an in-depth and semi-structured interview.

Thirteen participants (10 men, 3 women) from a large research institution in the northeast United States were asked to describe their academic and social experiences with attending an institution of higher education, as well as share their recommendations for enhancing their experience. Several themes emerged from analysis of their interviews.

The themes emerged within three categories: academic experiences, social experiences and perceived needs. Within their academic environment, most participants described feeling

inadequate with English language skills development and feeling under-prepared for their advanced coursework. Additionally, several participants described incidents of bias and discrimination in the classroom. Social experiences highlighted invaluable campus support services and the importance of eating as social activity. While all participants portrayed the community as friendly and welcoming, there were several incidents of discrimination and bias revealed. All participants highlighted a need for transportation and increasing the availability for and access to Halal food options, as well as having the desire to confront negativities portrayed in the media.

By exploring the lived experiences of this sub-group of international students, greater insights may be gained to open the door to this underrepresented population during a period of political and social uncertainty. This research may be valuable for professional development planning and educational leadership programs with the objective of creating positive living and learning environments that support the complex needs of Muslim international students from MENA and enhance opportunities that promote a culturally sensitive, respectful, and inclusive community.

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It seems quite surreal to finally be in the position to compose this section as I have thought about this moment for a very, very long time. Having the opportunity to look back and reflect upon this journey and all of the people who played such important roles in my success over the past 10 years, 7 months and 16 days has been a joyous and heartfelt process. I will forever be thankful.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For almost 60 years the relationship between the United States and countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has endured profound conflict. Political, economic and ideological tensions persist breeding mistrust, discontentment and acts of violence embroiling Americans and the predominantly Muslim nations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA; Gallup, Inc., 2002; Kohut, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013; Gallup, Inc., 2010a). Despite an increase in negative perceptions (Gallup, Inc., 2002; Gallup, Inc., 2010a; Gallup, Inc., 2015), and the number of hate crimes in America on the rise (United States Department of Justice, n.d.c), enrollment of international students from MENA nations continues to increase at institutions of higher education throughout the United States in record numbers (Institute of International Education, 2017c).

Given the increasing number of international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017c) and the economic (NAFSA, 2017a), academic and social advantages from international education (Institute of Higher Education, 2017g; United States Department of State, n.d.a; UNESCO, 2016), institutions of higher education may benefit from an increased understanding of the social and academic experiences of the students enrolled in their institutions. There is significant research available examining the transition to higher education (Althan, 1994; Arthur, 2002; Coppi, 2007; Huntley, 1997) and cultural adjustment for international students (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Singaravelu & Pope, 2007; Mostafa, 2006; Selvadurai, 1998), but few results offering insight into the lived experiences of Muslim international students from MENA enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States during a period of increased Islamophobia. Acknowledging that international students are

a diverse population and experience many challenges in their transition to living in the United States, studies recognize differences in the adjustment of national groups within the diverse international student population in the United States (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Henry & Fouad, 2007). This study will center on the subgroup of international Muslim students from MENA nations who share historically geographical, religious and cultural ties spanning centuries through the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire. Understanding the unique cultural influences and having an appreciation for the complexities facing Muslim international students from MENA nations is pertinent to meeting their academic and social needs and enhancing their experience in the United States (Henry & Fouad, 2007). As such, a study that provides Muslim international students a voice to describe their experiences while enrolled in U.S. institutions through qualitative expression has merit.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students from MENA nations enrolled in a public university in the Northeast. What follows is a description of the problem, the purpose of the study and research questions, the research approach, assumptions, rationale and significance of the study. A definition of terms is provided at the end of the chapter.

The Problem

There is ample literature reflecting upon issues of adjustment for students transitioning to institutions of higher education. In addition, studies focusing on international student transitions identify homesickness (Poyrazli, & Lopez, 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007) and discrimination (Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012; Ehrlich, 1994; Hanassab, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005) as significant challenges to acclimation on college campuses (Arthur, 2002; Andrade, 2006; Althan, 1994) are also in abundance. Furthermore, adding to these most widely researched stressors for

international students, Muslim international students are facing the additional and unique challenge associated with Islamophobia; the negative perceptions associated with their religion (Gallup, Inc., 2015, Arab American Institute, 2015) of which the research is limited.

As political and social issues involving immigration and terrorism are in the forefront of the today's media, and with crimes of hate increasing in frequency since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (hereinafter referred to as "9/11") (United States Department of Justice, n.d.b), concerns for the safety of Muslim students at institutions across the U.S. are also on the rise. (Marfin, 2017; Dickerson & Saul, 2016). Using Gallup Daily tracking data, Younis (2015) reports that prejudice toward Muslims in the United States is higher than any other religious group and most likely "among religious groups in the U.S. to report having personally experienced racial or religious discrimination (para. 3)." As world-wide competition for international students intensifies, institutions of higher education are faced with offering social, emotional and academic supports and services to foreign students to mitigate challenges and enhance success (Brown, 2012).

On campuses across the United States, students have access to a variety of support services to enhance the academic, social, career, and spiritual experiences for students. These services, along with other programs and activities, are generally designed to enhance the skills needed to cope with the many challenges faced by international students. Despite the significant stressors associated with the transition to foreign institutions, studies have shown a low frequency of international students accessing campus counseling centers (Mori, 2000). More specifically to this study, Henry and Fouad (2007) state that Islam "promotes a collectivist view of family and community" (p. 226) and Muslim students are more likely to confer with the extended family system for support. Therefore, services and activities under the umbrellas of

both academic and student affairs assume the responsibility for supporting, facilitating, and enhancing this multicultural mission faced by institutions of higher learning (Grieger, 1996).

Increased enrollment of international students from MENA nations (Institute of International Education, 2017b) coupled with a surge in Islamophobia (The Bridge Initiative, 2015) and hate crimes (United States Department of Justice, n.d.c) against Muslims in the United States, highlights the need to better understand the experiences of these students in order to offer vital supports and services. Presently, there is a gap in the literature in understanding the experiences and unique needs of international Muslim students on campuses across the United States. In order to obtain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences, this study examined how Muslim international students describe their lived experiences and perceived needs while attending an institution in higher education in the United States during a period of increased Islamophobia.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Research examining the experiences of Muslim international students on campus across the United States is limited. The vast majority of the literature on Muslim students in education derive from studies in Great Britain and other nations outside of the United States (Song, 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014, Jasperse, Ward & Jose, 2012). For those studies in U.S. higher education, much of the research on Muslim students' post 9/11 focus on ethno-religious identity (Shammas, 2009; Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2013). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim students from MENA nations enrolled at the University of Maine.

Given the increased anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, the primary question for this study is: *How do Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education in the United States describe their experiences?* Three sub-questions include:

1. *How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?*
2. *How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and surrounding community?*
3. *How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?*

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design seeking to obtain a narrative description toward understanding the perspectives of participants using words as data for analysis. Embracing a broad range of differing approaches and methods, by selecting a qualitative design, this study allowed for the flexibility to examine a variety of variables for a specific population in their natural setting. According to Patton (2002), “Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry” (p. 14). Furthermore, as the intent of a qualitative study is to acquire rich information for understanding the complexities and context surrounding a population, “Qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27).

Both a design and theory (van Manen, 1990; Giorgi, 1997), this study engaged a phenomenological approach, designed to examine the lived experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students from MENA nations attending an institution of higher education in

the United States. Unlike other qualitative research that explores processes, activities, and events (grounded theory) or cultural behaviors (ethnography), this phenomenological research study describes the individual experiences in a shared phenomenon. The review of the literature sought to define the parameters of the study and offer assistance in revealing patterns and emerging themes through data analysis. The framework of this research attempted to make sense of the lived experience that arose from individual participants, (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) and therefore, “a phenomenological researcher is interested in describing a person’s experience in the way he or she experience it, and not from some theoretical standpoint” (Bevan, 2014, p. 136). Furthermore various elements related to the participants experience are presented differently for individuals, thus phenomenology is discovery oriented and aims to develop new understandings of the lived experience and relying on the participants to describe their accounts by using their authentic voice. The study consisted of a purposeful sample of Muslim international students from MENA nations enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Maine. The primary investigator sought to interview a minimum of twelve Muslim international students who have been enrolled full-time for at least one academic year.

According to Husserl (1970), experiences stand out against a backdrop of context, providing meaning to the experience and as such, considering the context of each participants experience is vital to gaining meaning. Guided by the central research question, open-ended interview questions were constructed to provide each participant the means to describe their subjective experience in a first-hand account offering a narrative of data rich information by phrasing questions utilizing exploratory verbs and beginning with words such as ‘what’ or ‘how’. The terminology used for the questions reflects the research intent and creates a map for data collection (Creswell, 2007). Interview questions began with an exploration of the participant’s

life experiences prior to their attending the institution, providing context for their experience and eliciting opportunities for further probing and allowing examination of the phenomenon of this study against context (Bevan, 2014). Additional questions, focused on obtaining participants descriptions by asking broad, open-ended questions about their experiences “within the contexts or situations in which they experienced it” (Creswell, 2014, p. 140). A total of 17 questions were used to answer one central question and three associated sub-questions.

The phenomenological design and approach of this study enabled this unique international student population to describe their lived experiences through their authentic voices, which is needed as research is scarce regarding the Muslim international student population in the United States. Due to the gap in the literature, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding Muslim international students in higher education from the descriptions provided by Muslim students from the Middle East and North Africa nations that lived the experiences. The descriptions gained from this study promote a deeper understanding of challenges that face Muslim international students enrolled at U.S. institutions, particularly during heightened hostilities. Furthermore, the perceived needs expressed provide avenues for institutions of higher education to advance effective and beneficial programs and services to enhance the experience of this population.

Research Assumptions

The proposed study was based on several assumptions. The first assumption was that Muslim international students from MENA nations attending the University of Maine have experiences as a result of Islamophobia. This study also assumed that participants have unmet needs that would enhance their overall collegiate experience in the United States. Given the phenomenological methodology of this study, the primary investigator was the instrument for

conducting interviews and required personal interaction with the participants. This researcher assumed that participants who meet the eligibility criteria were willing to be interviewed and digitally recorded for this study.

Rationale and Significance

Fostering an environment that places an emphasis on achieving excellence in diversity and inclusion must be a priority for institutions of higher education in the United States toward strengthening internationalization and global engagement. In particular, with the current political and social climate, multicultural awareness surrounding Islam and the experiences of Muslim students from MENA nations has become increasingly important in their recruitment, retention and success. Recognizing the lived experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students at institutions of higher education may assist university personnel in establishing effective programs, services and partnerships that provide an opportunity for these students to flourish. Furthermore, creating positive living and learning environments that support the complex needs of Muslim international students from MENA may enhance opportunities that promote a culturally sensitive, respectful, and inclusive community. This study sought to obtain insight on the experiences of Muslim international students from MENA nations and identify their perceived needs for success at an institution of higher education in the United States.

Definitions of Terminology

- Hate Crime – A “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender,

or gender identity”, as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (United States Department of Justice, n.d.a).

- International student - As recognized by the Institute of International Education (IIE), an international student is an individual studying at an accredited institution of higher education in the United States on a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework (2017e).
- Islamophobia – Term used to encapsulate negative sentiments and discrimination against Muslims due to their religion, or the perceived religious, national, or ethnic identity associated with Islam.
- Middle East North Africa (MENA) - The Institute of International Education (IIE) defines the MENA region as the 19 nations under the foreign policy administration of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. (United States Department of State (n.d.b). These nations include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestine Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- Muslim – one who self identifies Allah as the “one and only true God” and/or practitioner of Islam.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education in the United States. Today, there are 903,127 international students enrolled at institutions across the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017c). Despite an increase in scrutiny, hate crimes and negative perceptions toward Muslims, 11 percent of international students enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States are from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) nations and the number continues to rise (Institute of International Education, 2017b). This chapter will highlight the relevant literature to support this research study. The review examines the history of international education in the United States and the benefits of international study. Statistics of international student enrollment in U.S. institutions are reviewed with the focus on enrollment data from the predominantly Muslim MENA countries.

Issues of transition and adjustment facing an international student population, with an eye on the unique challenges confronting Muslim international students, are also examined in this chapter. The years since the events of 9/11 have produced significant developments in national security law and policy (Altbach, 2005), impacting international enrollment, particularly with students from MENA countries. Moreover, the prominence of Islamophobia will also be examined as crimes of religious bias and safety concerns have surged and plaque the United States (United States Department of Justice, n.d.b). Finally, this chapter will briefly summarize the current literature exploring Muslim students in higher education.

History of International Education in the United States

Educational exchange dates back over eight centuries to 1190 when Oxford University welcomed their first foreign student (University of Oxford, 2017) with modern day efforts promoting international education launching after World War I (United States Department of Education, 2011; Institute of International Education, 2017a). Established in 1919, the Institute of International Education (IIE) deemed international exchange as a source of diplomacy and to be the foundation for achieving lasting peace by fostering “greater understanding between nations.” (Institute of International Education, 2017a). By 1930, the United States government adopted this viewpoint creating the first non-immigrant visa in an effort to support displaced German scholars and counteract propaganda (Institute of International Education, 2017a). With an unequivocal commitment to international education aimed at insuring trained expertise to meet national security demands, United States legislation provided for two comprehensive and mutually supporting approaches to international education: Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act). Initially focused on foreign language training and recruitment of foreign area experts for military and security purposes, both programs have evolved and expanded to work together “to provide a comprehensive infrastructure supporting international education” (United States Department of Education, 2011).

Through the political periods of a “Cold War” and ‘War on Terror’, higher education has continued to intensify the expressed commitment for the internationalization of institutions through mission statements, strategic plans and resource allocation (Knight, 1994; Scott, 1992; Moats-Gallagher, 2004). The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) challenged presidents and chancellors to take the lead in committing to

the internationalization of Land-Grant and public research institutions (Moats-Gallagher, 2004). With just over one-third of US institutions including international education in their mission statements (Siaya & Hayward, 2003), by 2011 over half of higher education institutions in the United States reported having a campus-wide plan (McGill Peterson & Matross Helms, 2013). Furthermore, President Barack Obama (2009) renewed the commitment to international study in the United States by expanding exchange programs and scholarships.

More than a half century later, the attitude of promoting understanding and cooperation for ensuring peace and prosperity between nations persists (Institute of International Education, 2017a; NAFSA, 2017a; United States Department of State, n.d.a). In 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), issued a report outlining opportunities for using international students in higher education to advance the public diplomacy, economic and development goals of the United States. Empowering future leaders to “experience the world beyond our borders”, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Department of State, Evan Ryan, asserted, “International education helps people develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in today’s global economy, and creates networks across borders that improve international understanding and strengthen the national security of the United States” (Institute of International Education, 2016a).

Statistics

For decades, millions of students have traveled outside their home nations in pursuit of higher education in the United States. Many international students perceive a degree from an American institution to be of high quality (Duran & Pipes, 2002; Spaulding & Flack, 1976) and offering a variety of academic programs not necessarily available in their countries. In a survey analyzing international students’ motivations for studying in the United States, the Institute of

International Education (2016b) found one hundred percent of the 420 participants reported a desire for English language fluency (Institute of International Education, 2016b) with the majority of international students seeking experience and career enhancement opportunities. Furthermore, 83% of respondents indicated their decision to study in the United States was driven by the reputation of the academic qualifications or degrees of American (Institute of International Education, 2016b). Similar to the motivators for international education promoted by legislators, educators and economists in the United States, international students also seek cross-cultural understanding, academic knowledge and participation in global markets with the goal of improving their lives (Gates, 2004; Guruz, 2011; Institute of International Education, 2016b; Mostafa, 2006).

Since 1954, the Institute of International Education has been publishing Open Doors on International Educational Exchange, an annual census of international students attending accredited institutions of higher education in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017c; Guruz, 2011). With the exception of the three years immediately following 9/11, the United States has seen a continual growth in the number of foreign students enrolling in institutions of higher education across the country for over 40 years. The most recent figures confirm another year of record enrollment, this time surpassing one million international students (Institute of International Education, 2017c).

In the 2016/2017 academic year, foreign students attending America colleges and universities reached a record high of 903,127 students, a three percent increase over the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2017c). According to the Open Doors report (2017) there are over 94 percent more international students studying in the United States during the 2017/2018 academic year than 20 ago and nearly 59 percent more than a decade ago. Students

from Asia continue to dominate overall international student enrollment in the United States with China and India topping countries of origin. Experiencing a decline in enrollment for the first time in 10 years, the fastest growing population of international students has originated from the MENA region (Institute of International Education, 2017f). Although in 2015, Saudi Arabia surpassed South Korea to become the third largest sender of international students to the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017b), this year's report shows Saudi Arabia with a 14.2 percent decrease in enrollment, placing them fourth in the leading places of origin (Institute of International Education, 2017b).

Despite a 3.7 percent decline in enrollment following the terrorist activities of 9/11, the number of international students enrolling in institutions throughout United States has grown for the past 11 consecutive years (Institute of International Education, 2017b). For eleven years (2005-2016), driving this increase was the number of students coming from Saudi Arabia, growing by 1426 percent (3,448 to 52,611 students) (Institute of International Education, 2017f), placing the nation fourth on the list of countries that send students to the United States, behind India, China and South Korea (Institute of International Education, 2017b). According to the 2017 Open Doors report, there are a total of 100,014 students from the MENA region currently studying at United States institutions of higher education. Saudi Arabia leads MENA nations with the largest number of students at 52,611, with Iran a distant second totaling 12,643 students. Algeria leads the region with the highest percent increase in students studying in America with a 21.5 percent increase in one year and Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen each increasing by over 8% (Institute of International Education, 2017b).

Benefits of International Education

While media coverage of the Middle East and North Africa region focus on political instability and violence; leaders in government and higher education are looking to reshape perspectives by highlighting higher education as a tool for enhanced globalization toward worldwide peace and prosperity (United States Department of Education, 2011; Institute of International Education, 2017d; United States Department of State, n.d.a; UNESCO, 2016). In the contexts of international relations, governance and trade, a knowledge economy that requires shared language, common skills and the capacity to work in diverse cultural environments is necessary (Guruz, 2011). As economists may define globalization more through quantifiable measures as an integration of commodity, capital and labor markets (Guruz, 2011), others may see higher education as a transformation for human development that involve the coming together for an open exchange and interaction of individuals (Boni & Walker, 2016) towards reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Although initially stated in 2003, UNESCO (2016) recently reiterated; “At no time in human history was the welfare of nations so closely linked to the quality and outreach of their higher education systems and institutions.” Institutions of higher education in the United States continues to intensify international student recruitment efforts for economic growth, integrate multicultural perspectives and prepare for global careers (Gates, 2004; Institute of International Education, 2016b; NAFSA, 2017a; Throsby, 1991; United States State Department, 2017).

International students have become a global commodity having a significant financial impact for the countries, institutions and their surrounding communities (Brown, 2012; Salvadorai, 1998; Institute of International Education, 2017d; NAFSA, 2017a). The prolonged growth of international students in American higher education has shown a significant and

positive impact on the United States economy (Institute of International Education, 2012; Institute of International Education, 2017d). In a special report on the economic impact of international students, the Institute of International Education (2017d) credits international students and their families for contributing \$36.9 billion in the American economy in 2017, up 137% from the reported 15.5 billion in 2007, through tuition and living expenses (Institute of International Education, 2012; Institute of International Education, 2017d; NAFSA, 2017a). Obama (2009) professed that “all of us must recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century.” In Maine, the financial contribution for the 2016-2017 academic year was over \$53 million (NAFSA, 2017a) and supported nearly 500 jobs. Additionally, the latest Open Doors survey (2017d) notes 67% percent of all international students receive the majority of their funds from sources outside of the United States, including personal and family sources as well as assistance from their home country governments or universities.

Students from around the world who study in the United States also help prepare American students for more global careers. With opportunities in the STEM fields increasing, international students contribute scientific and technical research and bring international perspectives into classrooms in the United States, and often lead to longer-term economic benefits. Over one quarter of all international students are studying engineering, math or computer science across the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017g). Evan Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Department of State stated “International education helps people develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in today’s global economy, and creates networks across borders that improve international understanding and strengthen the national security of the United States” (Institute of International Education, 2016).

Long established in United States policy and documented in literature, international education has been valued as a means of expanding diplomacy to champion economic development and national security (United States Department of State, n.d.a; UNESCO, 2016; United States Department of Education, 2011). A mechanism for acquiring competency in language, developing fluency in a foreign language, foreign study has supported access to understanding diverse cultures and ideologies around the world. Beyond the quantifiable benefits of economic growth and political relationships, international education also offers the intangible returns of cross-cultural understanding and the knowledge obtained through experience. According to the IEI's President, Dr. Goodman, students "will need to understand the cultural differences and historical experiences that divide us, as well as the common values and humanity that unite us," noted President Dr. Goodman (Institute of International Education, 2013).

Often seen as ambassadors of American culture, institutions of higher education and campuses across the United States are venues to enhancing classroom discussions, and sharing in cultural and social experiences. Fry (1984) explains the experiences and knowledge gained are the "basic building blocks in the development of a peaceful and cooperative global community" (p. 220). Robert Gates, Former Secretary of Defense, remarked that "no policy has proved more successful in making friends for the United States, during the cold war and since, than educating students from abroad at our colleges and universities" (2004, p. A23).

International Student Adjustment

Extensive literature is available regarding adjustment and cultural challenges facing international students in higher education (Arthur, 2008; Arthur, 2002; Althan, 1994; Pederson, 1991; Al-Darmaki and Sayed, 2009; Mori, 2000; Brown, 2012; Poyrazli, et al, 2001).

Multicultural scholars report tremendous hardships around language barriers leading to isolation associated with troubles with academic integration and difficulty developing peer relationships (Mostafa, 2006; Huntley, 1993; Yakunina et al., 2011; Mori, 2000). Compounding factors that impede a healthy adjustment for international students revealed in a qualitative study by McLachlan & Justice (2009) are homesickness and the loss of connectedness related to geographical location, culinary changes, financial pressures, and cultural traditions. Lee & Rice (2007) share international student perceptions concerning discrimination and argue that some challenges should not be considered problems with adjustment, but inadequacies by the host community. Understanding the benefits of promoting a healthy adjustment, institutions of higher education encounter the essential challenge of educating and supporting a diverse student population within their communities (Hanassab, 2006; Al-Darmaki and Sayed, 2009; Pederson, 1991).

A key theme established in the literature on international student adjustment is language acquisition (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Gomez, Urzua, & Glass, 2014; Mathews, 2007; Johnson and Sandhu, 2007). Mathews (2007) found higher levels of English proficiency were a positive indicator of success for studying in institutions of higher education in the United States. The exposure, use and mastery of the English language is an important tool for accessing and participating in academic and social activities (Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014). Highlighting concerns, Hirsch (1996) noted that international students are intimidated and “feel insecure about expressing their thoughts in English and articulating questions” (p. 18) while Hsieh (2007) and Poyrazli et al. (2001) suggest that international student’s feel invisible in the classroom and are overlooked during discussions.

Furthermore, Silva (1994) suggests that linguistic differences may be viewed as “intellectual deficiencies” (p. 39) resulting in alienation inside and outside of the classroom. With varying degrees of language proficiency and difficulty expressing needs, Mori (2000) affirmed “a lack of English language skills is likely to affect international students’ academic and social performances” (p. 138). International students acquire supports by establishing connections through academic interactions and developing peer friendships (Mori, 2000; Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014) and are encouraged to join clubs, participate in extracurricular activities, and practice their English toward achieving better adjustment (Yoon & Portman, 2004; Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014).

United States institutions of higher education strive to maintain a safe campus environment despite increased hostilities directed toward minority students. Previously established in research, ethnic and racial discrimination is a prevalent concern confronting international students in institutions of higher education across the United States (Ehrlich, 1994; Hanassab, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Ehrlich (1994) reported that about 25% of racial and ethnic minority students in higher education report being the victims of discrimination. According to the Office of Postsecondary Education’s Campus Safety and Security Statistics, in 2016 there were 1250 reported hate crimes on campuses across the United States, a twenty five percent (25%) increase over the previous year (1028), 49 of these reported crimes occurred on four year public institutions in New England (United States Department of Education, n.d.), eight in Maine (a 300% increase). In a study comprised of 287 college students, Rabyrn, Earleywine & Davison (2003), suggest that students “underreport a variety of hate crime experiences” (p. 1217) and may fear negative consequences of reporting. Furthermore, in a study by Sirin & Fine (2008), 88% of Muslim youth described at least one incidence of religious discrimination. A

campus climate marred by discrimination and hate may result in negative academic and social experiences, well beyond a single incident (Van Dyke & Tester, 2014).

A nearly universal experience, homesickness is described as an intense desire for familiar surroundings (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Thurber & Walton, 2012) and for students venturing away from the comforts of home, the higher education environment cultivates a “desire to belong, to feel socially accepted” (Thurber & Walton, 2012, p. 415). Moreover, in 2007, Poyrazli and Lopez found international students in the United States more likely to experience homesickness than domestic students and further accentuating the need for strategies fostering a healthy adjustment. A study of Asian international students conducted by Dao et al. (2007), found perceptions of English fluency and social supports were positively linked to students’ level of depression. Furthermore, Mori suggests that international students may more likely express emotional concerns through physical symptoms and seek out medical help. Additionally, as international student most often obtain advice and seek support from family, friends and religious avenues other services may be overlooked (Zhai, 2002, Mori, 2000). Typically unfavorable, the effects of homesickness may manifest as physiological and psychological concerns that negatively impact a student’s overall academic and social experience at the institution and may result in the institutions efficiency in retaining students (Thurber & Walton, 2012, Pederson, 1991, Winkelman, 1994). As the numbers of international students increase, institutional leaders are confronted with meeting the unique needs of foreign students and develop programs and services that best support a more positive experience (Brown, 2012, McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

Islamophobia

In 2015, Pew Research Center reported 23% of the global population, approximately 1.6 billion, were Muslim with future projection indicating near parity with Christianity by 2050. Although 62% of Muslims reside in Asia-Pacific, the highest concentration of Muslims are found in the Middle East and North Africa region (Desilver & Masci, 2017). Prior to this past academic year, the fastest growing number of international student enrolling at institutions in the United States have been from the predominantly Muslim MENA nations (2017f) with the highest levels of perceived religious discrimination and prejudice (Hanassab, 2006).

The relationship between Western nations and the predominantly Muslim nations of the Arab Middle East span centuries and rooted in the geopolitics of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (cite). According to the Global Attitude's Project (Pew Research Center, 2011) both Americans and Muslims from these predominantly Muslim countries agree that relations between them are poor. Since the end of World War II, ideological, economic and political objectives have laid the foundation for increased tensions between the United States and countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (Telhami, 2007). As United States involvement in the MENA region has intensified, so has the anger, mistrust, and outbreak of violence directed at American targets (Telhami, 2007). Equally, the unprecedented attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, along with the ensuing 'war on terror' resulted in a precipitous rise of 997 percent in the incidents of reported hate crimes toward those perceived to be Muslims in the United States (United States Department of Justice, n.d.c).

Existing in principal before 9/11, Islamophobia in the United States has increased in notoriety and 'gained wider currency' in recent years (The Bridge Initiative, 2015a). Despite the largest number of Muslims residing in Asia-Pacific, the terrorist strikes of 9/11 triggered a

backlash against the Islamic world whose center was pinpointed as the Arab Middle East. Carried out by Arabs and invoking Islam to justify a jihad against their United States enemies, Arabophobia also emerged as a racist stereotype of who the terrorists are (Saleem & Anderson, 2013; Taras, 2012). The attacks on the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan and the 'War on Terror' have brought the Arab Middle East and Muslim identity to the forefront of the media. Where media plays a fundamental role in the shaping of knowledge through TV screens, newspapers and internet, Conway (1997) submits that Islam and Arabs has been portrayed as inferior, barbaric, primitive, sexist and violent. The negative coverage of Islam in the Western media reached an all-time high in 2014, depicting Muslims as a source of violence and as enemies to the United States' national security (The Bridge Initiative, 2015b).

Acts of terrorism have had a profound impact on American perceptions of Muslims from MENA nations and more specifically, that Islam is a religion to be feared (Huntington, 1997; Gallup, Inc., 2010a; Gallup, Inc., 2002; Kohut, 2005; Ciftci, 2012) and terrorists reside in the Arab Middle East (Saleem & Anderson, 2013; Taras, 2012). Pew Research Center (2013) published a report revealing 42% of Americans believe that "Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers" (p. 3), an increase of 68% since 9/11 terror attacks in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2013). Gallup, Inc. (2002) disclosed a sharp decline in America's view of MENA nations including Saudi Arabia, Palestinian Authority, Kuwait, Iran, and Iraq when compared to results one year prior to the events of September 11. Saudi Arabia, the home to several of the 9/11 hijackers, had the most significant change in American public opinion with a 39% increase in an unfavorable view. (Gallup, Inc. 2002). Several years later, polls reaffirm unfavorable attitudes with over half of Americans reporting a negative attitude of Islam (Gallup, Inc., 2010a; Telhami, 2015).

Despite previous acts of terror, the attacks on September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, had unprecedented impact on campuses across the United States (United States Department of Justice, 2003). Aimed at strengthening domestic security, Congress enacted the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon (United States, 2001). The American Civil Liberties Union (2004) criticizes the USA PATRIOT act as a national security initiative permitting the government and law enforcement officials to rely upon “racial and ethnic profiling in its domestic counterterrorism efforts” with an avenue “to stop, interrogate and detain individuals without criminal charge – often for long periods of time on the basis of their national origin, ethnicity and religion” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2004, p. 1).

Higher Education in the United States was not immune to the political and social upheaval resulting from the hijackings in 2001. McMurtrie et al. (2001) cited growing hostilities and threats to safety as an impetus’ for students from Middle East nations returning home within days of 9/11. As hate crimes against Muslims surged (Department of Justice, n.d.b), U.S. institutions reported fewer international students expressing interest in studying on their campuses (McMurtrie, 2001) and later confirmed by a decline in the number of international students enrolling in U.S. institutions over the next several years (Institute of International Education, 2017c). In response to growing scrutiny, The Civil Rights Project (2003) at Harvard University produced *A Guide on Racial Profiling, and Hate Crime for International Students in the United States* to “safeguard the civil rights and civil liberties” fueled by the war against terror, further highlighting concerns for an unfriendly atmosphere. Mandated by the USA PATRIOT act and designed to electronically track and monitor international students in the

United States, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) is believed to be another indication that the United States was not welcoming to international students.

Implemented in January 2003, SEVIS policies resulted in applying for student visa's more costly and time consuming and seen as burdensome for international students in applying for and enrolling in institutions in the United States (Altbach, 2005) and compounding international student enrollment.

Over the past 16 years, the political and social climate in the United States has changed drastically, and followers of Islam continue to endure increased scrutiny, alarming rates of prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes (United States Department of Justice, n.d.b). In a study of 140 Muslims over a two-year period immediately following 9/11, Peek (2003) offered testimonies describing a precipitous increase in verbal and physical attacks, intimidation and experiences with racial profiling illuminating the terror attack as the turning point in Muslim American experiences. Housee (2012) reports the focus on the Muslim population, particularly women wearing the hijab, ethnic men with beards or other dress codes associated with Islam, continue to provoke hostilities, harassment and violence toward Muslims. A 2012 study of 153 Muslim women in New Zealand, wearing a hijab (head scarf) was associated to greater perceived discrimination (Jaspers, Ward, & Jose). Uniform Crime Statistics data reported the incidents of crimes directed at Muslims in the United States rose 136% over the past five years, the highest since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York (United States Department of Justice, n.d.c).

Immigration was central and represented one of the biggest divides amongst voters in the 2016 United States presidential election (American National Election Study, 2016). Since announcing his bid for the United States presidency in July 2015, Donald Trump held firm to his opposition to immigration and within seven days of his inauguration signed the Executive Order

Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States (Daily Comp. Pres. Docs., 2017). The order barred refugees from Syria indefinitely, suspended all refugee admissions for 120 days and blocked citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States for 90 days: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, essentially cancelling visa's and turning non-citizen travelers' heading to the United States away at airports across the world. Following legal challenges and the issuance of a revised executive order, an email signed by President Trump stated, "As your President, I made a solemn promise to keep America safe. "And I will NEVER stop fighting until we implement the policies you — and millions of Americans like you — voted for" (Zapotosky, Nakamura, & Hauslohner, 2017). The revised order, issued on 6 March 2017, clarified national security concerns, removed Iraq from the imposed 90-day ban list, and limited blocking of the issuance of new visas (Daily Comp. Pres. Docs., 2017). As litigation continued, in June, the United States Supreme Court, upheld portions of the Executive Order and permitted a temporary ban of entry for the six Muslim-majority nations of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Syria and Yemen, with an exception for foreign nationals with "a credible claim of a bona fide relationship with a person or entity in the United States" (Trump v. International Refugee Assistance, 2017). For institutions across the United States struggling to navigate through this period of uncertainty, the Supreme Court ruling offered the needed clarity for supporting foreign students, employees and faculty in their communities. The Supreme Court specified the example of students from the "designated countries who have been admitted to the University of Hawaii" as an example of a qualifying relationship with an American entity. Similarly, they said "a worker who accepted an offer of employment from an American company or a lecturer invited to address an American audience" would be an example

of someone having a relationship with an American entity that would qualify for exclusion from the travel ban. (Trump v. International Refugee Assistance, 2017).

Opinion polls of Muslim's in the Middle East region highlight the negative perceptions of the United States with the motivation behind these perceptions reflects on policy, not ideology (Pew Research Center, 2011; Kohut, 2005; Gallup, Inc. 2010b). According to the annual Arab Opinion Index published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (2015), the United States is believed to be a threat to the security of the Arab countries with 42 percent of respondents having an unfavorable view of the foreign policies of the United States. Gallup, Inc. (2002) revealed an overwhelming majority of Muslims identified United States support from Israel (85%) and interference in the affairs of Muslim countries (83%) as the impetus to their unfavorable opinions. Further substantiating these beliefs, 53% of Muslims, from predominantly Muslim nations, surveyed by the Pew Research Center (2011) hold foreign policies accountable for their economic deficiencies.

Although not sustained, the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center reported improvements in the opinion of Muslims from MENA nations between 2008 and 2009 toward the United States (Gallup, Inc., 2010b). A reported 21% increase in the belief that the relationships between the West and Muslim nations were “getting along” and 71% of Muslims from MENA respected Western nations. Additionally, 53% of MENA Muslims believe that increased interactions between the West and Muslim nations are a benefit and not a threat. This temporary boost in opinion is believed to be a result of the election of President Obama and subsequent speech seeking to break through the suspicion and cynicism that has propagated over decades acknowledging “It will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude and resolve” (Obama, 2009).

Muslim International Students in Institutions of Higher Education

Existing research on Muslim international students in higher education in the United States is perplexingly limited given the heightened focus on terrorism, national security, campus diversity, and the increase in the number of international students from predominantly Muslim nations. Most studies involving international students in higher education are examine the transition challenges facing all student sojourners; emotional and physical well-being, personal concerns (Poyrazli et al.), and academic successes and acculturation (Pederson, 1994) with little addressing the culturally diverse subgroups of the international student population. With limited research on Muslim international students experience in higher education in the United States, the following eight studies were found to be most relevant in the published literature pertaining to this study. Five were published in scholarly journals (Calkins, Callahan, Houlemarde, Ikpa, Jones & King, 2011; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Hanassab, 2006; Peek, 2003; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), while three were dissertations (Abualkhair, 2013; Hart, 2016; Heyn, 2013).

Hanassab (2006) conducted a quantitative study of 640 international students enrolled at a large, public, urban university in California in the spring of 2000. Students representing 8 regions of the world with just over half of the respondents from Asia and with the smallest number, at 33 participants, from the Middle East and Africa regions. The study assessed the experiences of international students in US institutions of higher education with perceived discrimination and their similarities and differences based on geographical region, program of study, gender and degree objective. The study found international students experience greater discrimination off campus compared to on-campus and that students from the Middle East and Africa perceived higher levels of discrimination than international students from other geographic areas. One student from Oman reported experiencing discrimination ‘against my

culture rather than my country” (Hanassab, 2006, p. 164). Hanassab suggests the results may have been different if the study were to have been conducted post 9/11 and in another university environment.

Immediately after September 11, 2001, Peek (2003) conducted a qualitative study of 68 university students from seven different institutions, both public and private, in the New York City area within the month following the attacks. The students were selected based on their membership in the Muslim Students Association with recruitment support through key contacts for the student groups posting fliers and sending emails advertising sessions and inviting participation. Predominantly undergraduate students, female and of United States citizenship. The 16 non-American citizens with either a student visa or permanent resident status self-identified their national origin from Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Canada, Great Britain, Greece, India, Indonesia, Japan, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Trinidad, Turkey, the United States of America, and Yemen. Students also self-reported as ‘highly religious’ based on their practices of Islam and observed attire, which Peek states ‘most certainly affected their individual experiences’ (p. 273). Findings were positive for the universities in reaching out to students to offer supports, resources, security and discussion groups to process emotions and events. Despite feeling safe on campus, students expressed safety concerns when outside of campus, reporting experiences with increased stares, verbal harassment and assault. Family fears were expressed with parental requests for students to change their physical appearance, modify clothing and stay home with an overall increased awareness of their surroundings. This study highlighted the negative perceptions of Islam portrayed by media and the resulting impact on the Muslim community which participants perceived to further incite misrepresentation and promote further discrimination. Although the

participants in this study were predominantly of American citizens, their reported national and ethnic backgrounds, observed and reported religiosity and the immediacy of the study post 9/11 creates the foundational research and highlights the events of 9/11 as the presumed turning point for the rise in Islamophobia and crimes of hate.

Tummala-Narra & Claudius (2013) conducted a qualitative examination of the experiences of 15 Muslim international students enrolled in graduate programs in the Northeastern United States. Participants were recruited through affiliations with pertinent institutional groups and organizations with a minimum of one year of United States residency. This study examined the experiences with acculturation, religious engagement, and social supports of Muslim international students for enhancing teaching and mentoring practices in United States higher education. Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013) found student experiences of adjustment converged with current literature on isolation, peer supports, language proficiency and religious practice and further suggests that religious identity in the emergence of Islamophobia indicates that discrimination as a source of stress may go beyond country of origin. The study acknowledged that graduate student adjustment may not be reflective of the Muslim International undergraduate students and recommended further examination.

Exploring the differential experiences of Muslim students' in higher education, Cole and Ahmadi (2010) completed a quantitative study of 203 Jewish, Christian and Muslim students and impact on academic success and satisfaction. Cole and Ahmadi found that being Muslim does have an impact on the student experience in higher education and suggest that "religious diversity is likely to have an impact on students' educational outcomes" (2010, p. 135). The study implies that religious identity results in positive outcomes and suggests a further

examination of the socially complex layers between ‘students interacting in diverse environments versus participating in ethnocentric environments’ (p. 136).

Further adding to the research of Muslim students in higher education post 9/11, Calkins, Callahan, Houlemarde, Ikpa, Jones and King (2011) explored the interplay of culture, religion and ethnicity in a residence hall environment of a large, public institution in the Midwest. With a reported residential population of approximately 10,000 this qualitative study had a relatively small participation of a total of 4 students, 3 domestic and 1 international which was identified as limiting the “scope of the student experience” (Calkins et al., 2011, p. 27). Overall, the findings did reflect a direct link between actual and perceived interactions with peers and students’ overall perception of the residential climate. Also expressed were concerns related to supporting diverse populations, particularly related to accommodating religious practice. Specifically related to the residential environment, Calkins et al. (2011) recommend exploring Muslim student satisfaction within the residence hall and further delineating the experiences of domestic and international student populations.

In exploring available research, several published dissertations were identified that offered findings relevant to this study. A qualitative study by Heyn (2013) examined the lived experiences of nine male students from Saudi Arabia attending a large Midwestern institution. Students shared perceptions of the United States prior to their arrival that perceived American’s as a well-educated population with advanced technology and high academic standards. In addition, participants shared anticipated concerns of fear, racism, and discrimination based on media and peer experiences or reports. Overall, the actual lived experiences described were consistent with adjustment challenges expressed in previous studies of international students including struggles with language proficiency, environmental transitions and homesickness.

Also reported were shifts in personal beliefs with previous perceptions that the United States was unsafe and Americans were unfriendly were not experienced.

In a study offered by Abualkhair (2013), eight Arab Muslim international students shared their academic experiences at a large urban institution in the Midwestern United States. Related to diversity, participants reported a “welcoming and respectful” environment (p. 169) while concurrently wanting faculty to have an enhanced understanding of their culture and religious practices. Further converging with the established literature on adjustment, participants reported challenges with academic assignments and interactions with faculty and peers resulting from English language proficiency differences. Abualkhair (2013) suggests institutions of higher education in the United States improve awareness of the personal, social and academic experiences of the international students served to better recognize and respond to challenges faced.

Hart (2016) conducted a phenomenological study exploring the experiences of eleven Muslim students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States and the perceived impact of Islamophobia student academic achievement. The six men and five women from four predominantly Muslim nations in the Middle East were interviewed. Students described prejudice and discrimination related to negative images and stereotypes commonly portrayed in American media. Female respondents recalled more frequent confrontations in the community and increased prejudice in the classroom related to their perceived increased visibility and traditional attire. All participants expressed limited interactions with Americans due to perceived negative attitudes and at the same time, sought community through group interactions in and out of the classroom. Despite religious hostilities, Hart (2016) identified several factors contributing to academic achievement of Muslim students. Several themes were

explored with key factors to academic success found to be establishing a system of supports through community and focusing on future goals. Hart offered numerous recommendations for future research, most aligned with this proposed study, exploring the experiences of Muslim students from other states to highlight differences within communities and regions.

Summary

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to lived experiences of Muslim international students from the Middle East and North Africa region as they pursue higher education in the United States institutions. Offered within this chapter is 1) a view of the history of international education in the United States with a focus on governmental leadership and opening doors to sharing knowledge and fostering relationships; 2) an summary of key statistics highlighting the significant growth in international student enrollment at American colleges and universities; 3) a survey of the global benefits to international security, economic development and cultural understanding; 4) an understanding of the challenges facing international students as they adjust to studying in the United States; and 5) an overview of the perceptions shared by ‘us and them’, the growing hostilities, fear and violence toward Muslims in the United States with a snapshot of the students seeking knowledge and understanding get caught in the fray.

While there are a handful of studies that embrace the experiences of Muslim international students in higher education in the United States, the dearth of research focused on Muslim international students specifically from the Middle East and North Africa region highlight the need for further study. As heightened concerns for national security call for increased regulations around entry for persons from these nations, compounded by increased fear and hostilities directed toward Muslims, highlight the need to understand the unique experiences of Muslim International students from MENA nations on campuses across the United States.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how Muslim international students from MENA nations attending an institution of higher education in the United States describe their lived experiences and perceived needs. The goal of this study was to provide Muslim international students an opportunity to share their voices through qualitative inquiry that describe their lived experiences in the United States in an effort to obtain a better understanding of their unique experiences and needs toward creating a positive environment for students to flourish. This chapter presents the methodology and research design for the study.

The primary research question that will guide this study was, *How do Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education in the United States describe their experiences?* Three sub-questions included:

1. *How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?*
2. *How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and surrounding community?*
3. *How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?*

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

This study was guided by the researcher's interest to understand the lived experiences of Muslim international students at a United States institution of higher education in Maine. In order to better understand and gain a deeper meaning of the human experiences from the

participant's perspective, Patton (2002) and Creswell (2014) suggest qualitative methods offer an in-depth and open approach to research inquiry. Qualitative inquiry is "characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). As such, a qualitative approach was chosen as most appropriate for uncovering the experience and meaning for exploring Muslim international students' lived experiences with higher education.

In contrast to the large sample size of quantitative studies, qualitative inquiry typically engages a smaller sample of participants and is used to empower "individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationship that can exist between the researcher and the participants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Given the current and frequently changing political and social climate for Muslims within the United States, the researcher chose a qualitative research design to reveal the shared experiences as described by Muslim international students in their authentic voice. Since the purpose of this study is to obtain knowledge and understand the universal nature of the shared phenomena, an in-person, semi-structured interview method of collecting data, using open-ended questions was an effective means of capturing "the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21).

Rationale for Phenomenological Methodology

Phenomenology aims to describe and understand the common meaning of shared experiences for a small group of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to capture the essence of how Muslim international students describe and attach meaning to their lived experience with the shared phenomenon of attending the University of Maine. This methodology is "important

to understand these common experiences in order to develop practice, or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon' (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

A semi-structure interview using seventeen open-ended questions allowed Muslim international students from MENA nations to describe their social and academic experiences prior to coming to the United States, and their experiences while enrolled at The University of Maine in their authentic voice. In addition, participants were asked to describe any comparisons between their expectations of their experience and their actual lived experience in reflection of the wholeness of the experience. This in-depth, semi-structured process allowed the researcher to follow cues of the participants and probe further to ensure broad coverage of the experience is achieved and provide for a freer exchange between the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2007).

As an inductive process, phenomenology attempts to look at the experience through the lens of the participants' perspective and without judgment (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to uncover the meaning of the Muslim international students experience while attending the University of Maine. The purpose for using an inductive approach is to condense extensive data into a summary format to establish meaning (Creswell, 2014).

Self as Researcher

The primary investigator of this study approached this research with certain concerns and assumptions about the experiences of Muslim international students. A female with extensive experience and knowledge of living, working and studying abroad, the researcher has been to several predominantly Muslim nations, however only one of the countries identified for this study. Although raised in a culturally Christian home, no particular religion is personally practiced, and the researcher is moderately familiar with Muslim culture, having numerous Muslim friends throughout the United States and Middle East North Africa region and having

read an English language version of the Quran. In higher education, the researcher has worked in residence life promoting healthy transitions to higher education and offering programs to increase diversity awareness. Through international recruitment efforts, this researcher assisted international students and their families with admissions and enrollment processes to institutions of higher education in the United States and visa application processes required by immigration policy. Additionally, this researcher is a licensed clinical counselor and has supported international students with issues of adjustment to university life in the United States and abroad. Recognizing these direct and indirect experiences may impact researcher interpretation of the experiences shared, efforts to minimize bias were employed throughout the study and are described in this chapter.

Research Sample

In total, thirteen participants from a public, four-year research institution in the Northeast United States comprised the research sample. A combination of a snowball and criterion techniques was used to identify the eight participants from Iraq and five from Saudi Arabia who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The criteria for participant selection included:

- 1) Must be at least 18 years of age;
- 2) Citizen from one of the following nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestine Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen;
- 3) Self-identifies Allah as the “one and only true God” and/or practitioner of Islam;
- 4) Pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree (*excluding English language instruction*)
- 5) Full-time registered international student attending the University of Maine;

- 6) Completed at least one academic year at UMaine in any program of study.

Through an in-depth, semi-structured interview, descriptions of Muslim international student experiences were collected from ten male and three female participants over sixteen weeks in the fall of 2017. Participants were solely volunteers.

Recruitment of Participants

Using a qualitative framework, this researcher sought to generate data from a specific group of people aimed to better understand how participants derive meaning from their experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994) within their environment. With no specific rules for determining a sample size, typically qualitative research involves a small sample to obtain rich information. Creswell (2007) recommends a sample of five to 25 participants for phenomenological studies using purposeful sampling techniques that “inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon on the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). For this study, a collaboration of criterion and snowball sample methods was used to identify thirteen individuals that have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling involves locating key informants of a small subgroup where existing participants assist in identifying future participants from among their acquaintances (Patton, 2002), which in this study is Muslim international students from MENA nations. In addition, a criterion sampling strategy was also implemented to study participants meeting a “predetermined set of criterion of importance.” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

A snowball sampling technique was used to identify Muslim international students by sending the Office of International Programs and the Multicultural Student Services at the university and the local Islamic Center and Mosque a letter seeking recruitment support (Appendix A). Through examination of university services, local community supports and

communications with members of my dissertation committee, these locations were strategically selected to access the existing population of potential participants. Each organization was asked to forward an email communication (Appendix B) inviting Muslim international students to participate in this research study and attaching the Informed Consent (Appendix C) for advanced review. The email communication was followed up with a brief phone call to answer any questions and confirm support for reaching out to potential subjects. Each location contacted was willing and able to forward communications to respective populations.

Highlighting the success of the snowball sampling component, two interviews were recruited by contact through the Office of International Programs. Subsequently, one of these participants identified three additional subjects and of those interviews resulted in two more recruits. Three students learned of the study through members of my dissertation advising committee, and although one of these participants did not meet the eligibility criteria to be included in the research, they were instrumental in identifying four additional subjects to be included in this study.

Upon contact, the primary investigator used a criterion sampling technique and completed a Participant Contact Survey (Appendix D) reviewing the eligibility criteria and confidentiality standards of the study with each participant. Once eligibility was confirmed, an interview was scheduled at a location and time agreed upon by both the participant and researcher. Only one potential participant was not eligible, however instrumental in recruiting others to participate.

Design of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim students from MENA nations enrolled at the University of Maine. The procedures for

identifying a qualitative purposeful sample complied with the Policy and Procedures of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects of the institution. This researcher followed the process described below.

- Letters of inquiry were distributed to the Office of International Programs, Office of Multicultural Student Life, and the local Islamic Center seeking assistance with identifying eligible students to participate in this research study (see Appendix A). Also provided were a letter of invitation (see Appendix B) and a copy of the informed consent (see Appendix C) to be shared with potential participants.
- Upon initial contact, the criteria for inclusion was verbally reviewed prior to scheduling an interview (see Appendix D).
- A pilot interview with two non-eligible Muslim international students was conducted to test the interview questions that were not changed after analyzing the interview (see Appendix E).
- Upon initial contact, a code name (pseudonym) was assigned to support confidentiality and contact information was destroyed once the interview was completed. The researcher did not record or maintain a participant's name or contact information unless temporarily required for purposes of scheduling the interview. Any immediate contact information remained confidential and deleted upon completion of the interview.
- Interviews were scheduled at a time and campus location identified and/or agreed upon by the participant where a review of the informed consent (Appendix E) and eligibility criteria (Appendix D) was completed.

- Data were collected using seventeen identical, open ended and semi-structured interview questions (Appendix E). Supplementary follow up questions were asked as needed for probing and clarification.
- Each in-depth interview lasted between one to two hours and recorded for audio and transcribed by this researcher. Following each interview, this research wrote brief notes highlighting observations and thoughts about the interview.
- Digital audio recordings and transcriptions of each interview were password protected on the principal investigators personal computer and a back-up electronically stored.
- Data were analyzed using coding methods to minimize bias.

Collection, Analysis and Synthesis of Data

The collection and analysis of qualitative research aims to identify and interpret patterns seeking meaning to answer the research question (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). As the phenomenological design requires that the researcher minimize personal bias and examine the data through a fresh lens, an analysis of the data began with a review and reflection of self as the researcher. The analysis of data began with the use of bracketing whereby this researcher reflects upon previous knowledge and experiences, and explores preconceptions and biases that may taint the research process and thereby supporting the validity of the data collection and analysis. (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Through an in-depth, semi-structured interview process, descriptions of Muslim international student experiences were collected from a total of thirteen participants. This study includes eight participants from Iraq and five from Saudi Arabia, with ten males and three females being interviewed. As a comfortable and naturalistic setting is recommended (Moustakas, 1994), data were collected through one in-depth, semi-structured interview taking place at in a confidential

and private location within the institution identified and/or agreed upon by the participant.

Interviews were conducted over a 16 week period in the fall 2017 and estimated to be about 90 minutes with the actual time varied between 61-127 minutes in length. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by this researcher following each interview.

Data collection involved digitally recording one individual, in-person interview using a hand-held recording device. Each interview took place at a time and campus location identified or agreed upon by the participant. Given recent Executive Orders regarding immigration policies and potentially impacting student travel, interviews using an encrypted video conference system (e.g., Skype, Zoom or Google Hangout) was available to participants, if needed. Open-ended and semi-structured interview questions (Appendix E) were employed allowing each participant to explore and reflect upon their lived experiences as Muslim international student at the University of Maine. Supplementary follow up questions were asked as needed for probing and clarification, via an inductive questioning approach to answer the research questions. Each interview was transcribed by this researcher and saved in Microsoft Word documents. The recordings were replayed and reviewed multiple time to achieve accuracy and explore any nuances in the communication. This researcher took field notes as a supplement to recordings.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggests that data analysis include a combination of methods. The first process of analysis used was bracketing and reflecting on personal knowledge and experiences to set aside researcher's assumptions and knowledge of experience. As recommended by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994), all data were then organized in electronic files, labeled without compromise of participant's respective identities and password protected. Through a process of reading the interview text and regarding each statement relevant to the experience with equal value, the data were further reduced (Moustakas, 1994). Using a color coded spreadsheet,

these statements were reviewed and condensed to find clusters of meanings according to categories and patterns. Furthermore, the data were reviewed in search of emerging themes across experiences seeking commonalities and differences in their shared experiences and perceived needs (Creswell, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study were provided by the university's Institutional Review Board. Permissions from the Office of International Programs, The Office of Multicultural Student Life and the community Islamic Center to distribute the invitation to participate in the study were obtained. All efforts were taken to protect the identity and privacy of the participants for this study. The researcher used appropriate steps to ensure the identities of the participants remain confidential and anonymous as outlined in the Informed Consent (see Appendix C). Data were secured electronically by password protections and working drafts were stored in a locked file cabinet to which only the principal investigator had access.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Within the context of qualitative validity and establishing trustworthiness in the findings, this research study explored validity using multiple approaches (Creswell, 2014). To minimize bias, Creswell (2014) suggests self-reflection to create an open and honest narrative containing comments on how the researcher's interpretation of the findings is shaped by their own background. For this study, reflecting and examining bias and preconceived judgement started through dialogue and discussions with peers, faculty and advising committee during the beginning stages of developing the initial study and before the start of research. Prior to data collection, the interview questions (Appendix E) and related protocol was piloted with two non-

participating Muslim students to assess needs for improving questions and format (Creswell, 2014). No adjustments were made to the interview questions. A member checking strategy was implemented during the interview to clarify the participants intended message through active and reflective listening to assess accuracy of the findings. This is particularly important as the participants were non-native English speakers. Furthermore, brief field notes were documented following each interview to further set aside bias and diminish any negative impact on the analysis.

Limitations

The institution selected for this study has a limited pool of international students from the MENA nations and as the students may predominantly embrace Islam, this researcher cannot assume all students from these nations identify as Muslim. As the institution does not collect demographic data based on religious affiliation, establishing a precise number of eligible participants was not feasible. Muslim international students may be reluctant to participate in the study given the researcher does not identify as Muslim and interpretations of participants' experiences may be inconsistent with their own understanding. Reflecting the overall limited target population enrolled at the institution and the influence of the snowball recruitment method, the sample did not embrace a more broad representation of nationalities and a more balanced representation of sex.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify how Muslim international students from MENA nations enrolled at the University of Maine describe their experiences and perceived needs and assess the meaning of these experiences against a backdrop of increased anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. The goal of the study was to provide a voice to the Muslim international students' experiences and obtain insight into their needs in order to understand the complexities of their experiences, create a positive living and learning environment that supports and promotes a culturally sensitive, respectful, and inclusive community, and provide the opportunity for students to flourish. Research in this area is essential to assist institutional and community leaders, and student affairs personnel in the creation, implementation and evaluation of campus programs. This chapter provides a comprehensive picture to answer the overarching research question: *How do Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education in the United States describe their experiences?* Three sub-questions that were examined include:

- 1) *How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?*
- 2) *How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and surrounding community?*
- 3) *How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?*

Also within this chapter, each sub-question was answered by the identified themes that emerged from the interviews and presented in the following three sections: academic experiences, social experiences, and perceived needs. Each section concludes with a summary

highlighting key findings with a chapter summary emphasizing the findings to answer the overarching research question. The quotations and examples selected from the interviews best depict and support the emerging themes.

The data were collected through in-person interviews from a sample of thirteen international Muslim students representing two nations in the MENA region enrolled full-time at The University of Maine over a period of sixteen weeks in the fall of 2017. The interviews were recorded for audio and transcribed. As this population within the institution is very small, pseudonyms have been used and specific demographic information has been generalized or shared as aggregate data to protect the identities of the participants.

Participant Demographics

The final sample included a total of thirteen participants, ten males and three females (Table 4.1). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants included in this study. The sample represents two countries of the MENA region: Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 38 years old with nine men and three women interviewed. Eleven participants identified as married with one or more children. Each of the participants identified as Muslim and all three women wore a head scarf (Hajib). With the average attendance at the institution being 4.5 years, participants were in various stages of study from near completion of their undergraduate degree to finishing their Ph.D. Each participant met English language proficiency of the institution prior to enrolling into their degree program. The demographics of the participants (Table 4.1) are below.

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Citizen	Sex	Degree	Years at Institution	Marital Status	Age
Ferran	Iraq	M	PHD	3	Married	38
Mahmoud	Saudi Arabia	M	MS	5	Single	25
Hassan	Iraq	M	PHD	3	Married	36
Makeen	Iraq	M	PHD	2.5	Married	29
Sadiq	Iraq	M	PHD	4	Married	34
Ziad	Iraq	M	PHD	3	Married	27
Sabir	Saudi Arabia	M	BS	6	Married	31
Salem	Saudi Arabia	M	BA	5	Single	24
Sayyid	Iraq	M	PHD	4	Married	32
Sadirah	Saudi Arabia	F	PHD	8	Married	33
Samia	Saudi Arabia	F	PHD	6	Married	31
Abdullah	Iraq	M	PHD	5	Married	35
Widad	Iraq	F	PHD	5	Married	34

In order to establish some context for the participant's experiences while attending the University of Maine, the interview questions began with an exploration of their knowledge and a reflection of their experiences prior to their arrival to the United States and the institution. The researcher begins with a portrayal of the experiences of participants as they reflect upon their

knowledge and understanding of the United States and share factors that influenced their decisions, and their expectations upon arrival.

Factors that influenced their study in the United States

After reviewing each transcript, all thirteen Muslim international student participants report being initially awarded scholarships by their home nations to study abroad. With twelve continuing to receive government funding, one participant had completed their previous degree and was currently receiving a departmental scholarship to pursue their Ph.D. Participants describe very lengthy selection, admission and visa processes extending over a two year period of time. In their pursuits to study abroad, each recounted their home sponsors offering numerous countries from which to choose including: the United Kingdom, Japan, Netherlands, Australia, Canada and the United States. Consistently recounting the reputation of a strong education system, access to advance technology and resources, recommendations from family and friends, and the enhanced personal and career opportunities available; all, but one participant, identified studying in the United States as their first choice, with varying reasons for institutional selection presented.

Required to obtain both a Master's and Ph.D. degrees as a condition of her employment, Samia cited attaining her degree in the United States was the "first recommendation by my sponsor." Having discussed options with family and friends, she shared, "my father was a student here [in the United States] in the 80's was encouraging and supportive of the high quality education" and "friendly American people." In regards to her selection of this particular institution, Samia reflects upon the compounding influences of relationships and underlying constraints of time stating:

One of my friends is a student here at the university...and she helped me to finish my application. I think the presence of someone that you know to facilitate the process was helpful to move forward, so I can start my journey.

Inspired by professional development, research and literature within his field, Sadiq explained his choice to study in the United States was both professional and personal:

The reputation of the American education and...especially the books we read in our discipline have inspired me to have my degree from there [United States]. My major have me have publishable works as journal papers and this is important in my discipline.

Envisioning a future for his three young children, Sadiq shared, “Another reason was to have my children to speak bilingual; our native language, Arabic, in addition to English. This will help them further in their education in the future.” Also acknowledging the pressures of time between his selection for a national scholarship and admission into a degree program, he explained the impact of time as a factor in his choice of U.S. institutions:

Once we are selected by our sponsor, we have only two years to get admitted to university or the scholarship will be terminated. So we have a critical time. I started to be half of my second year and I still didn’t get admission from one of the universities and within six months my contract will be terminated with the committee and I lose my opportunity to have a degree from the United States, so the University of Maine was the fastest to respond, so that’s why I chose.

Following completion of his Master’s degree, Abdullah was offered the opportunity to pursue his Ph.D. in Malaysia. Declining this initial offer, he shared several factors that influenced his decision to pursue his study in the United States. “I always dream to be an

engineer” and “my professor was very admiring of the educational system in the United States...and he was a graduate from Michigan State University.” He recalled being advised by two uncles to ‘imagine the opportunities’ available in the United States and after researching American institutions and found “the best ranking [universities] over the world.” The culminating influence in his decision was family. As he progressed through the admissions process, he married and mused,

then my wife got pregnant and I started to think about other things. I am Iraqi and I have this passport which is hard to get my visa...it's not everyone getting visa for the United States many people, they got rejected. So I found that the United States, they off the citizenship for anyone who come born in the United States, rather than who are his or her parents. My son or daughter would get the [American] citizenship, which is one of the best citizenships in the world. So now, I have all the options that make the United States the first choice. I chose Maine because my supervisor says Maine is number one, in his opinion, one of the best place to raise children and of the safest places in the United States.

Passionately reminiscing upon his journey to higher education, Ferran describes:

This is the dream of my life...since I was twelve years old. I've heard stories from my dad...and all the time was talking about America...from my dad friends who came here to Baltimore. So I've heard great stories. The United States, [has] the best kind of education, the classes, the professor's, the labs, the experiments. I believe it's the best in all around the world. I'm crazy about the United States. My goal was to go to New England, especially near Boston...they got MIT, Harvard, the museums, the theatres, the life, but in New England, that's some specialty, at least in my heart and in my mind. So I

applied. I worked for two years every day. I sent more than 50 emails every day, for two years to university, to supervisors, coordinators of departments because my admission is in time limited. I have to get approved from the department, then the University, then the United States, so I get it after of fighting a chance for my dream.

Islamophobia is not a deterrent

Each the participants shared awareness of the negative perceptions of Muslims reported in the media prior to their arrival. Furthermore, with an average length of enrollment within the institution at 4.5 years, many participants reported that the magnitude of the negativity has only increased over the past couple of years and therefore was not a substantial priority in their decision making. With a general belief that media alone is not a trusted source of information, all participants relied on the advice and reported experiences of trusted family, friends and colleagues when making decisions on the path to higher education.

Armed with his analyses and data, Ferran states, “Until now, I know you see the media even what happened from before and after President Trump, but I think the story of the United States is less racist than Europe with language of numbers.”

Having arrived in the United States four years earlier, Sadiq reflects upon the current climate and worries for the future.

We see like the political wave is different from where we came and at the same time, we are afraid for the future. We do have concerns that might be different in the future and we do have concerns that the discrimination percentage might rise. We see the political impacts now is different, how the Middle East region in not stable and how the media picturing Muslims. I feel that Muslims is a big question mark or a threat, so this might bring some extra laws to our shoulders.

Reflecting upon the negative impact of the media, Samia expressed her initial concerns and the influence of peer recommendations stating:

How did I know if my hijab will be something people like or dislike, you know. The news isn't very comforting, but I have a friend who study here with his wife and she say, 'no worry, you should be fine.' Now I go to the grocery and I'm fine without my husband and it feel nice.

Themes from the Data

Participants discussed a wide range of experiences that answer each sub-question and presented within the following three sections: academic experiences, social experiences and perceived needs which identify themes that emerged upon analysis of the interview transcripts (Table 4.2). A closer look at each theme as it relates to data findings of this study is presented the sections below.

Table 4.2 Themes from the Data

Academic Experiences	Social Experiences	Perceived Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling Inadequate• Feeling Under-Prepared• Classroom Bias Exists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Campus Supports are Valuable• Eating is a Social Activity• Maine is Welcoming or Not	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transportation is Necessary• Halal Food is Essential• Confronting Negativity is Desired

Academic Experiences

In this section, three themes emerged from the experiences of the participants from within the classroom environment. The researcher answers the first research sub-question: *How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?* Collectively, the participants felt their English language skills were inadequate upon

starting their coursework. In addition, most of the sample described their academic preparation as lacking the foundational knowledge required for their degree program. Finally, with all participants describing an overall positive academic experience at the institution, several shared negative interactions with faculty that they perceived as discriminatory.

Feeling Inadequate

A prominent theme that emerged throughout the interviews embraced various challenges the participants face as non-native English speakers. Each identified the Writing Center as a key resource for enhancing organization, grammar, sentence structure, and issues of clarity and understanding. All participants described challenges with reading, writing, listening, or speaking skills that impeded communications and created additional stressors in their academic pursuits.

Describing an overwhelming stress and resulting physical impact of experience with English language deficiencies, Sadirah explains:

It's not easy with the classes at the beginning. It was so stressful, my English wasn't good; writing was so hard. My writing was a very low level...and that was kind of shocking for me. I get very harsh response from the professor complaining about my writing. You know, I spent a whole week, while other students spent like, three hours to do this [assignment], trying to understand the paper and write a critique paper. There is a lot of little rules and grammar and syntax. You [Americans] spent a lot of years in elementary school going over all those tiny little pieces...I get six months.

You know speaking, understanding, and listening is hard enough, never mind writing. I mean, my writing is totally different. Also, you can't imagine how long it takes to read one bit and to translate everything on your phone. It was crazy. How can I describe, I can't describe it. I lost 15 kilo. I think, oh my goodness this was crazy.

Distinguishing between conversational and academic English, Salem explains, it's very challenging...it is our second language, even though my mother was an English teacher when I was younger...and I speak better than most of my Saudi friends. I mean, even though I have a couple of accent issues, but that is not a problem. We all struggle with the academic English, which is basically, you know, you can have a conversation with someone, they can understand you, [but] when a professor is lecturing [this] is quite different and...would use some of the words that are not very commonly used. I was going crazy; the professor was speaking and I would not understand a single word.

In depicting his challenges with listening comprehension, Ferran recounts using a variety of supports and modalities to enhance his overall English language skills, and still feeling inadequate:

My biggest challenge is with English language, with figuring words. Sometimes when I talk to you...I miss the words. I think writing is my bestest skill, because I can focus more when writing...but nothing is black and white and there's a lot of gray there [English rules]. The Writing Center helped me a little bit, but I also spend time, myself, to see YouTube videos, and figured out stuff there too. I spent seven months in IEI and the English Language Institute and it helped me develop out my skills. I make two presentations, I write assignments to help me develop [my skills]. But you know, seven months is not enough, not enough for someone in a Ph.D. [program].

In addition to challenges with writing and speaking skills, Sayyid shared similarities with Salem, expressing a gap in English language preparation resulting in difficulties with transitioning from the English Language Institute to a classroom environment.

When I came here, teachers are talking and I don't understand, like 70%, 75% of their speak. Sometimes I understand when the people are talking, but I cannot speak exactly. The transition is difficult. The English learned in IEI is not the same as needed in the class. Sometimes I write a report by myself, but I know this is not what I mean, the grammar, it's not the same as Arabic grammar; different completely. I write in Arabic, translate to English, but this no good way, then I go to the Writing Center and they give me a start...this is good.

Mahmoud, distinctly advices that "all international students, not just for Muslims, are to have strong English language....before coming here."

Feeling Under-prepared

The academic experiences of most of the participants in graduate programs were consistent for their descriptions about feeling under prepared for coursework. Ten of the eleven participants seeking advanced degrees shared challenges with a lack of fundamental knowledge in their area of study. Each recalled meetings within their department and advised to take prerequisite undergraduate courses in advance of starting graduate work to obtain a foundation for the graduate studies. Samia recalls:

I learned different things in the [science] department in Saudi Arabia. I didn't know something really very important...just I came here without any basic knowledge needed for [my] major. At the first time to meet my adviser he asked [me] to take undergrad class to help me improve [my] language and all the terms you know in biology and molecular biology.

Recalling his first meeting with his academic advisor, Ferran shares a similar experience,

I take my certificate to my graduate advisor. I sit with him [advisor] and we review class by class and he say to me to take three undergraduate classes. I said, ‘why not’ because this is good, right for me.

Describing the emotional impact of a “really big gap” between the education in her home country of Iraq, and that of the United States, Widad reveals experiencing feelings of inadequacy “so great that sometimes I [feel] stupid and I do stupid things for stuff I should already know.”

Feeling unprepared for advanced technologies not available in his home country, Hassan experienced “a hard life” struggling to learn and understand technology and current software programs “that other students already learned” and were necessary in “solving my homeworks, my exams and my tech projects. Maybe about twice the time I spend catching up.”

Classroom Bias Exists

All thirteen participants of this study describe an overall positive academic experience that embraces open access to inquiry and respect for knowledge. With a consistent sentiment across the entire sample, Samia summarized her account of the University of Maine stating, “It’s an amazing place, amazing people, amazing education.” Nevertheless, four students revealed experiences with faculty that they questioned or perceived to be discriminatory based on their country of origin.

Facing “bad consequences with either option”, Sadiq disclosed a current experience where he was having to choose to “leave the university” or request an advising change that “will change my whole committee and well that means starting over.”

Appearing very sullen with eyes downcast, Sadiq searches for how he came to this situation:

I don't have a good relationship with one of my faculties and sometimes that stops me to think, is that related to discrimination or something or is that just bad luck to be supervised by such advisor? He's advising other international students, but not from Iraq. I'm in a stage now passing my qualification examination, so I'm a candidate now and he is my advisor in my committee. He knows all my deadlines and he know that any delay causes me a lot of work and effort to finish. I submit my work regarding to my program, either he ignores or he waits, and I have not time to finish. My scholarship requires that I earn my degree and have publishable work...by spring 2019. I submit a research proposal with a timeline and from September up until this moment [November], I didn't hear from him. I am trying to be patient...because each moves it might have bad consequences on me.

Reporting numerous outreach for assistance with academic leaders largely unbeneficial, he discloses another disappointment without explanation:

We started working on a journal paper and when I finished that journal paper and submitted to him and asked to have his approval to publish, he took months to review it and then simply said, 'I don't think we can publish.' Through a whole sequence of meetings, he said we were moving forward and my work was publishable and then he stopped and had me retake my qualification exam. I don't want to say that's a discrimination issue, because I don't have any evidence on that, but simply...he sent me an email saying 'I cannot support your work anymore, so either you take a master degree or you seek another advisor.' I don't know what to do.

Makeen perceived his differing experiences with faculty by stating, a “faculty member who is generally not from the U.S., I could say is a little bit kinder” and “they understand our situation...because [they] are international...and came [to the U.S.] on the same process.” He shared his belief that some professors did not fully understand the pressures faced, particularly as an international student from Iraq:

You know, I am an international students...travelled for 10,000 miles from your family, and you came here without...relative support. For us, it’s not only studying, because we are concerned like about the earthquake that happened two weeks ago...the war in our homes, and thinking of your family back there. Also, we have family here to take care of, how to make appointments, get food, pay needs. I hope faculty understand more for us.

He continued, expressing that “a lot of U.S. professors” have not allowed for any additional time necessary to adequately demonstrate “creativity” and “deep thinking” that “might take longer” than a native English speaker:

I prefer writing a paper, you know, rather than...stand up and talk, because...some people, they judge you from the first minute. You know, as a professional, you cannot judge when you have a native English speaker and me and judge which one is better in terms of having their ideas quicker, it’s not fair.

He described enduring “painful” and “definitely uncomfortable feelings” that [faculty] are “not trusting [my] knowledge.”

For Ziad, he recalled a negative experience with a former academic advisor who disagreed with his academic results and questioned his ability for success. He detailed his government’s selection process as “taking only top students” and “we work very, very hard.”

After having expressed his concern and “defending his work,” he stated, his “ex-advisor was like God” and reported to the Graduate Coordinator that he “was not a good student” and lacked progress. He recounted a requirement to “show my work...defend [results]” and highlight progress toward publication. Despite a positive outcome and feeling “more confident that I am the good student,” Ziad describes this experience as “very offensive.”

Immediately following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, Salem states he was “shocked” and “surprised” by his professors confidence in announcing in a political science class, ‘it’s definitely the Saudi’s’ when identifying the terrorists without “not even a single proof.” In describing his experience Salem recounted,

The professor, the whole class, know I’m from Saudi Arabia” and “he [professor] turned to me...and was waving his hands toward me. As if he knew that he was intentionally wanted to, you know, tease me and even after the news had identified those responsible, he [professor] came up with the same question on the quiz and...put Saudi Arabia as one of the multiple choice answers.

Feeling “devastated” by the stereotype, he questioned the policies of the institution and stated, “Using this type of, you know, racism or, you know, discrimination, should not be allowed in class.”

Academic Experience Summary

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the Muslim international students from MENA nations were persistent and focused on achieving their academic goals despite classroom unanticipated hardships that arose. Specifically, all participants acknowledged that limitations in their English language skills created unforeseen challenges, especially having successfully completed a developmental English program. Most participants’ shared unimagined deficiencies

in their academic preparedness required additional coursework to support gaps in their knowledge base before starting their degree program. Participants noted that conversational English learned in language programs do not prepare students for the academic language used by faculty in degree programs which is portrayed in both their feelings of unpreparedness and inadequacies. Also surprising were accounts of perceived bias by faculty that were encountered in the classroom. With expressed feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, helplessness, and confusion; the majority of participants reflected upon their previous academic success, utilized academic support services and received encouragement from family to overcome adversities.

Together, these challenges subjected participants to overwhelming stressors embracing time. Repeated throughout, participants shared the limitations to the time allotted by their respective scholarship sponsors to develop English language competencies and successfully complete their degree. Seemingly unanticipated were the increased time needed to complete assignments, increased course requirements potentially extending time to degree completion, and inconsistencies in faculty communications resulting in delays in advancement. For the majority of participants, family responsibilities further exacerbated these academic challenges. Clearly evident, time is precious and time is limited.

Social Experiences

This section describes the experiences of participants as they pertain to their activities and interactions outside of the classroom and answers the second research sub-question: *How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and surrounding community?* Discussed in detail below, four distinct themes emerged from participant samples of transcriptions from the in-depth interviews as they relate to how Muslim international students describe their social experiences (Table 4.2). All interviews highlighted

various campus-based support services identified as instrumental in serving the needs of each participant's transition, retention and inclusion on campus. Also consistent amongst the sample, was the shared participation in social engagements that embraces the culture of food. Furthermore, the institution and surrounding community is believed to be welcoming and friendly.

Campus supports are invaluable

A prominent university resource highlighted by each participant was the Office of International Programs (OIP). The program staff and services provided were repeatedly acknowledged as a foundational resource for navigating challenges and providing various resources to enhance the experiences of international students. Mahmoud summarized, "We visit the international office first, before doing anything, so that's it our number one help." Salem expanded upon this sentiment noting:

The international office plays a major role in connecting international students. For example, every Friday, they have a Coffee Hour...and you would have all the organizations rushing into there to let people know who they are and what's their mission. The Assistant Director always emails you...and tries to connect [students]...sharing [immigration] information and telling us that they are going to stand beside our sides...comforting us...creating that home feeling environment and making people feel safe.

Furthermore, a review of each transcript emphasized several reoccurring social activities of importance including: the weekly Coffee Hour, monthly Women of the World, and annual Culturefest. A few participants also identified intramural soccer, as an opportunity to gather with peers.

Noting little time for social interactions, Sabir and Samia each attributes OIP with connecting them with Conversation Partners to enhance their language skills, with the connections developing into more meaningful relationships. Sabir, reports:

My first semester, I have a Conversation Partner and we meet like twice a week. Until now, I'm still contact with her and we visit every two weeks every month. She has been helpful for me for language and advice.

Samia described her Conversation Partner as "part of my family now." She further explained,

We started to visit every week, and one day, we met her husband and her kids. Now my kids just freaking out when they hear her name. They call them auntie and uncle and when my parents came for visit, they met. So when I graduate from my Ph.D., I said no doubt I will come back and visit this family because I really feel those my family here.

Particularly detailed by all seven Iraqi participants under current sponsorship by their government, was the gratitude for the outreach and support provided by OIP as a result of several months without receiving their monthly scholarship stipend and most recent unexpected changes to their health coverage. Abdullah explained, "Last year, we got some problems with the university and we had around six months without salary [scholarship stipend]."

With the support and guidance of the OIP, participants were able to postpone payments to university based services. Expressing relieved, Abdulla recalled:

Most of us live at the University Park and they said 'you can stop the payment on the rent' and this included tuition, fees. For me, my daughter was in the university daycare, so, yes, this was also very helpful. Imagine, have no income for months, I mean, it's hard to study, when you're worried about all these other things. Even now, two weeks ago, they [sponsor] surprised us by another issue...and changed the rules of health

insurance...reduced the amount of money by \$500 per person. My family is three, so I have to pay \$1500. The international office is helping us, and are requesting a waiver with the Graduate School.

Only one participant shared an experience with the Office of Accessibility Services and was included as the benefits accentuate the extent of which resources are available and the depth of their impact. Pronounced as the fundamental support that “changed my life,” Abdullah describes how the support he unexpectedly encountered has significantly influenced all aspects of his daily living. He begins by sharing some historical context to his experience, “I have many negative things in my life...because of my vision. I apply for a lot of jobs....and one of the most qualified people...but when they sent me to the medical, I got rejected...several times.” On one occasion, he recalls after spending forty days of job training, the supervisor, “realized that I’m going to close from the screen, and I’m holding the rail when I used the stairs, or I start to touch things...so there is nothing can hit me or hurt me...then again, I got fired.” Despite obstacles and repeated rejection, Abdullah describes persevering and how this institution provided opportunities he never knew were available.

All through school, I had never gave any support or help to make things easier. I never seen the blackboard, I just was listening to teachers...otherwise read and understand on my own...from preschool until I graduated from college. All these years I had never gave any support or help that makes things easier for me.

Abdullah describes in detail his referral and immediate support “from the beginning, day one at the English Institute.” He reported, “In the United States, I am legally blind, based on my vision” and since arriving, has received support and obtained equipment, software and training

that offered an independence not previously experienced. Expressing amazement and gratitude for his newfound ability for self-reliance, he described:

I can sit in the class and I can see the board very clear...see my screen, I can read anything. I can shave, I can cut my nails...I can do everything with this equipment. Also, the accessibility supervisor contact the blindness department...and they accepted me based on the rules to help me with by disability inside and outside the academic area. They give me two trainings, one for mobility on the streets and technology...to read the mail, even ingredients [of food] at the store. The supervisor suggested me scholarships...and they qualified me for...equipment that is portable and I can carry out to home or to classes and attach to my laptop, I'll see the blackboard.

Eating is a Social Activity

A prominent theme and pattern of behavior shared by participants was common eating practices, particularly using food as a social engagement opportunity. For Muslims, this experience is culturally guided by the practice of breaking fast and sharing a meal with family and friends. Despite reported limits to time due to academic requirements or family responsibilities, each participant identified activities of sharing food as an opportunity for cultivating community.

The most widely attended activity reported was the monthly Pot Luck offered at the Islamic Center of Maine. Sabir shared, "I do social activities with my wife and family....with my neighbors. We have a community at the Islamic Center" and "we meet every month and have a potluck." Sadirah reported, "I started going there and having fun because I love all of them, they're really amazing and all the delicious food." Offering personal insight into a more meaningful connection to the Potluck, Widad revealed:

Generally...Muslim international students from this area understands family is really important. So when you talk about the potluck or you're having dinner at a friend's house...that gathering of people is really important...and force us to be involved in the community like when we are at home...gathering with family, uncles, cousins, grandparents...if it's just for coffee or tea or sitting down, you have to visit. We have a lot of friends in here just to fill the space, like we can having our families...visit.

Sponsored by the Office of International Programs, the weekly Coffee Hour is a social gathering, often showcasing a country or cultural presentation that includes tasting foods from around the world. Very active in seeking out social opportunities, Mahmoud reported, "OIP has lots of events and gatherings...bringing people together, and that's a good thing to be a part of. Coffee Hour, I go there regularly, yeah, it's a good time." Equally engaged in social outreach, Salem noted the Coffee Hour is "the kickstart" for "meeting a lot of people from different countries...and expanding your network."

An annual event each fall semester, Culturefest is a daylong exposition of world cultures with exhibits, food, talent and traditional dress celebrated. A highlight of the event is the ability to showcase "our food and culture" noted Sayyid. "I know that the people here, not just us Iraqi people, but people from different countries, they like [Iraqi] food, because...we participate in Culturefest and we got best food certificate. We are not constructed like an organization, but we [Saudi's] always do stuff, like participating in Culturefest."

Maine is Welcoming or Not

Prior to arriving on campus, each participant noted anticipated concern for safety based on the information received through media, their families and/or their friends. Although worries existed, these concerns were not initially a deterrent in pursuing their education in the United

States. To the contrary, participants of this study reported that any apprehension was quickly alleviated and although some experiences of discrimination and bias have been experienced in the community, the instances were few, with no examples of physical harm disclosed. Nine of the thirteen participants explicitly deny experiencing any instances of discrimination since arriving in the United States instead offering positive stories of acceptance and inclusion. After multiple negative experiences with U.S. Customs, one Muslim international student from Saudi Arabia, Salem, disclosed he would no longer be pursuing an advanced degree in the United States, “but, I would still want to come back and visit...just for the record, Maine is the least racist place I've ever been and they are the nicest people you can ever meet here.”

Sharing his ease with making friends “from my very start,” Ferran sought to find balance and make sense of what he has heard and what he has experienced.

I see all the media talk about Muslims, how all the people treat Muslims. I know actually, there is no need to exaggerate and measure to all United States, to all Maine, to all the Bangor. Even in my city, even in my family, you found one of the kids will be different...no one is the same and we shouldn't be judged the same.

Finding comfort and fostering numerous relationships in his “full American experience,” he adds,

We have many friends, American friends, Muslim friends, all countries. No one asked me ‘are you Muslim?’ I don't feel like anyone ever marginalized or discriminated against me. Before I came, let us say, I does 10% feel afraid, but when I came here not this 10%, probably less than one percent I feel afraid. I went to New York, to Boston, to Connecticut, to New Hampshire and nothing. My wife wear a scarf...and I didn't hear anyone say anything. My wife take classes for one year [at a community college] and all

the people is supporting her and she went alone and back alone for one year. We have lots of American friends. I think it's the best place to live and study. I'm crazy about the United States.

Similar to Ferran, but with limited opportunities for traveling outside the local region, Ziad reflected:

Before I came, I didn't think that people are good here. I haven't engaged with other people from other states, but based off of on my experience here, I changed my mind because I know very, very good people. They are so kind and helpful...I would love to stay here. This is very good community and this is very good life to live.

Expanding beyond the more broadly recognized 'friendly and kind' community environment described, Ziad touches upon the impact of feeling excluded and unwelcomed. Disclosing disappointment within his own academic community, he also recounted, "during the department barbecue event, for instance, we usually have a barbecue in my department that every student is invited, but for Muslim people, most of Muslim people doesn't eat meat unless it's Halal."

Following several months of financial difficulties, Sadiq described disappointment, confusion and feeling disregarded by their academic department 'family,' He details,

We are several students in the department, and lots of my friends were talking to their professors, but they didn't do anything. We hopefully can have somebody just stand up and talk...and say okay we can help you...we care about you. This kind of feeling is only in the community, right? We were surprised that so many peoples on campus were willing to help us...but nothing was even from our own department.

Directly facing religious difference and practice, both Salem and Mahmoud offer their accounts of interactions with peers. Upon arriving on campus, Salem was faced with addressing religious differences fairly quickly. With concern for his roommate's experience and putting any of his own worries aside, he spoke:

My first roommate was Jewish. And honestly, when I knew that he was Jewish, I could not sleep the whole night because I thought that [he] would not be comfortable if [he] knew that I was Muslim. Then the next morning, I just told him where I was from and he is one of my best friends right now.

Entering the on-campus prayer room and finding Christian peers in prayer, Mahmoud ensured other's comfort before his own, asking if. "I am bothering them or something and they said 'no.' They were welcoming me and say to me that the 'room is for everyone.'"

Although any pre-arrival worries regarding safety quickly dissipated as the entire sample expressed feeling safe and welcomed within the community and local region, varying levels of worry and concern exist with several first-hand experiences of bias, discrimination and perceived threat revealed. Detailing two separate incidents experienced by his wife, Makeen described:

Recently, there's a woman, her forty to fifty years old and she was asking my wife, 'What are you doing here?' and my wife just answer, 'I'm shopping.' The lady said, 'no, I'm asking why you are here in the United States?' My wife, she was surprised.

Thankful, one of the employees there, she was talking to that lady.

Presenting an additional incident within a couple months of arriving on campus, he depicts the actual experience and the misconceptions of how they are judged.

My wife had a worse time than this that happened when one guy was you know just pulling my wife scarf and saying nothing. I mean, we are here legally on a scholarship

and my government pay me. I came here by you know when the United States authorities allow me to come to the right to the United States. I'm not a refugee, I'm not relying on your community to pay me for living...or my government cover everything...so don't be worried because...I'm just a student, and once I finished my study, I'll go back home to my country.

Prompted by a mass shooting in Florida and widely narrated in the media as an act of Islamic terrorism; Sabir spoke of the immediate backlash and longer-term impact on his experience and that of the local community.

Before I went to the Islamic Center, the mosque every day. We have five prayer and usually want every five prayer there...because if you pray would put the group prayer better then pray alone. After the last year...and something happened in Florida last year...someone, they call and they put message in the Islamic Center that they will do something...they will make fire or something. I didn't go so there was some concern that something would happen...and the police were called. There was lots of concern when that happened and we don't go to the Islamic Center to do prayer anymore. I can pray in the home or because not a lot of people come anymore, I can go at night...but even as time passed, the attendance didn't go back up during the day for prayer.

Acknowledging that incidents have occurred, Hassan seems to prescribe to a similar perspective to that of Ferran's shared above and not generalizing incidents to the greater population or possibly overstating the incident. Without detail, Hassan acknowledged experiencing "very, very small isolated comments" and quickly under-stressed it's impact and asserted, "But, we don't remember...it looks like just anything that's negative. I think that in each society in his community; where there is positive, there is negative."

Most concerning were the detailed and humiliating experiences with U.S. Customs officials as described by Salem, upon his return to the U.S. following his travel home to visit family. Expressing both fear and confusion, he recalled:

I used to go back home almost every vacation, but the past two years, I was not able to go back because my father was very worried about the U.S. customs. Every time I come into the U.S., they would hold me for six seven hours interrogating me for nothing. The last time, I thought I was going to jail for no reason. I don't even have a parking ticket. I don't understand. I mean literally treated me and other Saudis as prisoners. I had to walk on an imaginary line...follow a certain line...the officers screaming in my face. It's very unprofessional, very paranoid and it's a shame that it reached such a level. So in terms of discrimination, I didn't face until I told people where I was from. They took my passport...see a Saudi passport...and they overreact. My father told me, 'you should just stay there and finish and then come back', instead of taking the risk. Every time I arrived to the U.S., I feel like I'm going get in trouble...they psychologically pressure you as if you did something wrong you're about to get caught. I'm not going be able to finish my education.

Social Experience Summary

Throughout the interviews, Muslim international students from MENA nations clearly expressed the importance of community and meaningful relationships. Guided by the Office of International Programs, having access to current information, opportunities for social engagement and obtaining assistance when faced with unforeseen challenges, participants believe they have a strong foundation of support within the institution. Similarly, the practice of establishing and maintaining relationships is fostered through cultural outreach and the

intentional sharing of food is underscored by both the campus and community activities consistently attended. With safety of self and family a priority and despite incidents of perceived Islamophobia experienced, commonly shared amongst Muslim international students from MENA nations is the belief that the University and surrounding community is friendly, welcoming and a safe place to live.

Perceived Needs

This sections describes the perceptions of participants as they pertain to their needs to enhance their experience at the institution. The researcher answers the third research sub-question: *How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?* There were three distinct themes that emerged from participant samples transcriptions from the in-depth interviews as they relate to how Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences. (Table 4.2). Collectively, participants felt hindered by their inability to access services and supplies as a result of limited information and cost options for transportation within the rural community. With challenges obtaining culturally appropriate food items, participants repeatedly share their experiences with access, cost and limited supplies within the community. Finally, as negative perceptions of Muslims persist, participants report active participation in educational activities that promote awareness of Islam and also described a need for opportunities to showcase the positive aspects of their religion and culture. These will discussed in further detail below.

Transportation is Necessary

Frequently reported by participants was the burden of accessing services and supplies and understanding new systems upon arrival to the rural community. The most common issue collectively shared by ten participants was the limited access to transportation. With immediate

needs upon arrival, the idea of finding and purchasing supplies was described as burdensome and costly. For participants with family members, having consistent and reliable access to transportation was identified as necessary and assistance with understanding the many facets of purchasing, registering, insuring a vehicle and obtaining a license would be beneficial.

Ferran describes his experience in the initial weeks of his arrival in the community as very difficult, particularly with obtaining access to supplies for his family and relying on the assistance of others to meet their most basic needs.

One of the big issues when I came here, I really find it very important, is the car. I came here with no international driving license and the process take about four weeks' time. So, for the first four weeks, I asked my friends, I find most of them are very busy...and I ask, 'please can you take me to store to make some shopping.' I mean, when I arrived to United States, I asked at a taxi and there's not bus, so I look around town, and they take me to make shopping. Using a taxi is very expensive for family.

Experiencing similar challenges with access to supplies and services, Hassan offers additional details regarding the importance of having transportation:

The public transportation here is poor...and the taxi, takes time and is very expensive. My wife, she doesn't drive, she doesn't know how to drive. So, if my wife or child has an appointment or needs to make shopping, I need to leave my studies to go take them. Now, we know people from the same community, and helpful.

Similarly, Sayyid stated the need for transportation, yet unlike Ferran's account, the focus of his experience was primarily the challenges with obtaining a vehicle.

Transportation is expensive, but necessary to be success here. I told my friend when he want to come here, the first thing is you cannot stay without a car. You need to buy a car,

yeah. There are busses, but it will be hard for you on your family, and if you don't have a car, you need to get first thing and for two thing, you have to get a license to drive with exam, yeah and car insurance. There is a lot to understand when you first come and cost very much money.

Likewise, after briefly affirming the need for transportation, Mahmoud, explains his perspective and how navigated the challenges.

It's difficult to get a driver's license or insurance and figuring all that out. I use my driving license from back home...it's international, and easier for me. The laws is different from back home...for example, the stop sign. I have to stop here, but back home, no one cares to stop. Even the median [cross-walk], they respect here for the walking in between...they respect it very much.

And offering a solution that provides assistance to others, Sabir shared:

It's be really important to live by the campus and by the mosque and it's easier to do some things and if we need the help, we can find someone. So, if we meet with a new student and they ask about apartment, car, or need help with shopping, we can help. My cousin gave us his car, when we came here, so I didn't have any trouble, but some of my friends...looking for a car, it takes like two weeks to find the car, then other things, like insurance. Some gets a rental, until they can buy one. This is very expensive, but not like taxi.

Halal Food is Essential

The second theme that emerged related to the perceived needs of Muslim international students was access to food that meets lawful Islamic dietary standards of Halal, particularly meat. Repeatedly, participants described difficulties with obtaining Halal foods within the

community and with no availability on campus. In addition to the religious importance of having access to Halal food, and now understanding the social importance of gathering and sharing food, participants have experienced this basic need as both elusive and exclusive. Adding context and comparing availability to Iraq, Sayyid noted:

The difference here, it's really different between the USA and my country, is the food. In my country, we have a lot of food...the kind of food is different. The challenge is finding the right supplies and you cannot find at Hannaford or other places, but we find from an Iranian guy, because we eat halal meat and sometimes it's hard to get meat.

Adding to the importance of maintaining a Halal diet, Hassan details a collaborative strategy with community support for obtaining food locally.

You know, we have to eat halal product. Here we for the first time, because I don't have a lot of friends to ask them. I didn't eat meat for maybe two months, until I went to Portland and there is a shop in a Muslim community there. This got a little bit of challenge spots, it is far away. But now, sometimes we go to a farm and ask to sacrifice a sheep, and they respect this.

Offering an alternative perspective that highlights the impact of limited food options available within the community, Sadiq shares how dining out or not, impacts his family choices.

I never thought about how more difficult for families to feel like home and wish to have like a restaurant to eat. Like for families to have like KFC or fast food or any other things that are Halal so they can eat...and not to have precautions in eating the meat. We would shop and have to go to Portland...so my wife and the kids willing to make such a trip to make them feel at home. This is minor, I cannot say it's major because there is a variety of food that we can eat from here, it is not only meat or chicken. We

also just learned that there's a farm nearby that is accommodating and we can get sheep and slaughter them the way we need and have the meat for several months.

Confronting Negativity is Desired

Prior to arriving in the United States, each participant acknowledged having heard negative perceptions of Islam and the increase in reported incidents of hate and discrimination. Since arriving, the political and social climate around terrorism, immigration and national security has heightened tensions, blurring the defined lines between a perceived terrorist, refugees seeking safety and those practicing Islam. Participants are keenly aware of how Muslims are overwhelmingly, negatively portrayed in the media and, as Muslim international students from countries believed to sponsor acts of violence, how they may be viewed as threats to the community. With a desire to improve perceptions and demonstrate the positive aspects of their religion and cultures, participants repeatedly shared their ideas and strategies for challenging negativity.

Citing exposure to other cultures and lifestyles, Salem shares his thoughts on racism in America and how his own identity provides opportunities for expanding other's views.

Before 2011, I was very excited. I knew that there was some racism going on, but I was white, and people always tell me that I have a European accent and assume that I am from Europe. It's just that stereotype and misconception that people have with each other until they go outside in the outside world. Most of them [American's] have never left the United States. They watch the news and believe it. I mean, most Americans, when they travel, they know that they've been wrong. I would say that from the Middle East and people think that's a country, and then I would say was from Saudi Arabia, and 'oh is that Dubai?' no, that's another city. I've had people have their face change...totally

shocked and don't know what to say, and some people who rejected the fact that I was Saudi because I was too white. So, I will force myself to be a good example, of who we are as people and you know as Muslims. I confront racism as a good example and making sure they know they were wrong.

Offering a more structured opportunity for enhancing perceptions, Widad presented her idea for sharing information and encouraging conversations.

People can go have a lunch break once a month...and they have a discussion...on a different topic on Muslim culture or religion. Maybe one week it's learning the important values...and even the history of the population and...with more conversation, people started becoming more to hear knowledge, but they become more comfortable engaging in a conversation. Honestly, sometimes I think Americans stare because they are not sure what to say or how to say it because they don't want to sound stupid. You know we have our own TV press problem and I don't know if they plays a part, but I think, on the flip side...I think the more interactions and maybe going to each other's houses, but at least having some sort of intentional gatherings that provide an opportunity to those experiences and to see how much there are similarities versus difference, I think would be very helpful.

Demonstrating an outgoing strength of exuberance for meeting others, Ferran expressed confidence in his personality and character for understanding others and building friendships. In addition, he shares an example of how he might confront negativity and address safety concerns.

I'm sure, I'm pretty sure so if left between the extremists people who support Donald Trump and I bet you that they will be my friend, They are on the Facebook with me...they are extremist people and see President Trump as their angel...and they said

bad things about Muslims. I don't blame them because, I lived where Muslims killed Muslims more than Americans killed Muslims. I don't do many people believe me, I mean, I do know when they say someone Muslim kills, so why should I defend this Muslim and on this side if he's bad so I have to be because I'm Muslim and he's bad Muslim for me. I have to be number one who to tell the police about and not to try to found a way to escape him and this is what happened around the world.

Magnifying a perception that leaders attend the Open House to acknowledge representation within the community, yet the annual appearance does not quite reach the level of investment and understanding desired. Seeking to enhance visibility and value, Sayyid voiced:

I would send an invitation to those leaders to come join us. I know we have had an open house...and a lot of people, they came...and not just Muslims, a lot of people from the university, teachers, students...they all came to the Open House. We are happy to see the people, its non-Muslims and they came to understand about Muslims. Muslims is friendly and we love all the people in the world. So I would suggest they [leaders] come more often, not just for Open House, but maybe other times to have a smaller experience. Maybe a couple times or three times a year they came to one of our monthly potlucks and just see a part of our group...and would know the benefit to the community. I need them to have another picture of Muslims...Muslim is not just fighting Muslims, I need them to talk with friendly Muslims. We love all the people in the world...and after they talk with me, yeah, they changed their mind about Muslims.

Perceived Needs Summary

Throughout the interviews, Muslim international students from MENA nations illustrated some complexities around some foundational needs. Surprised by the limited access to public

transportation and nuances of vehicle ownership, participants perceive transportation as their priority barrier for accessing services and supplies. Similarly, obtaining and maintaining access to a food source that is in keeping with their lawful practices of their religion is considered cumbersome, both in the community and on campus. In keeping with the practice of establishing positive relationships and building community, participants repeatedly disclosed a desire to model practices and develop outreach initiatives to enhance understanding and improve perceptions of Muslims.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the overarching research question: *How do Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education in the United States describe their experiences?* There were three sub-questions answered in this study, which included Muslim international students' academic experiences, social experiences, and perceived needs. Three themes emerged from academic experiences, three themes from social experiences and three themes from perceived needs.

There were three themes that emerged in the participants' academic experiences. Most participants described experiences with facing the unforeseen obstacles in their in the classroom environment. Contributing to feelings of inadequacy, were the limitations to their reading, writing, listening, and verbal expression of the English language following the successful completion of a developmental language program. Adding pressures of time and addressing feelings of unpreparedness, most participants required to complete course prerequisites for their degree program, found the materials beneficial and necessary. Finally, with a few incidents of perceived bias within the classroom environment disclosed, the preponderance of participants,

describe overwhelmingly positive experiences with their communications, interactions and supports at the institution.

There were three themes that emerged from participants social experiences. The entire participant sample describe the services provided by the university as beneficial, intentional, and supportive. Although faced with academic and family responsibilities, each participant recounted the importance of developing meaningful social relationships and shared experiences of campus and community engagement. Despite a rapidly changing political and social climate underscoring an increase in hate crimes and safety concerns, a preponderance of the participant sample view the community as a safe place to live and described their interactions and relationships as both friendly and welcoming.

There were three themes that emerged as perceived needs by the participants. Most participants report obtaining consistent and reliable transportation as necessary to their daily function. Furthermore, obtaining information and assistance with navigating the nuances of vehicle ownership would be beneficial. Although successful in accessing resources, most participants describe the limited availability to culturally appropriate food offered within the university and local community as challenging. Considered essential to adhering with Islamic law, most participants incur additional constraints to their time and costs associated with obtaining halal food. Finally, despite increased scrutiny and negative perceptions of their culture and religion, Muslim international students are committed to engaging in positive interactions and participating in constructive activities that highlight the beauty and care of their culture.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter includes a discussion of the research goals, findings and conclusions made pertaining to these analyses. The research findings are discussed in relation to existing research and the deeper meanings woven throughout, as well as recommendations for enhancing the experiences of Muslim international students enrolled at the University of Maine. The limitations and recommendations for future research are also presented.

Discussion of Findings

Using a phenomenological approach to data analysis, this dissertation explored the lived experiences of Muslim international students studying at the University of Maine and how this research sample described their perceived needs for enhancing their experiences. Presently, the research dedicated to this culturally diverse subgroup of the international student population is surprisingly limited, particularly given the increased international student recruitment efforts by institutions of higher education throughout the United States and combined with the public scrutiny embracing issues of immigration and terrorism that have intensified Islamophobia and concerns for safety for Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). This study is both unique and pertinent as the experiences described recognize factors impacting this small subgroup of international students during a period of heightened hostilities, while simultaneously adding to the existing and small body of literature regarding Muslim international students from MENA nations in higher education in the United States (Henry & Fouad, 2007; Calkins et al., 2011; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Hanassab, 2006; Peek, 2003; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013; Abualkhair, 2013; Hart, 2016; Heyn, 2013). Finally, this study is unique as participants specify perceived needs to enhancing their success and outlining opportunities for

institutional and community leaders to advance effective programs and services for support and inclusivity. This study aspires to shine a brighter light on the immediate and complex challenges faced by Muslim international students from MENA countries enrolled at a rural, public institution, offer recommendations to assist this unique subgroup of sojourners in navigating a rapidly changing political and social climate, and act as a conduit for continued dialogue and action toward inclusivity.

The findings outlined in Chapter Four revealed how Muslim international students understand their challenges with English language skills, interactions with faculty, and gaps in preparedness for academic study. The results highlighted the benefits of familiarizing and accessing resources valuable to academic success and promoting social interactions. Conveyed as important to the participants' transition and on-going success, the findings also identified having reliable transportation, culturally appropriate foods and opportunities for promoting positive awareness of their culture as basic necessities to enhancing their experience. Incidents of religious and ethnic bias and discrimination occur in and out of the classroom and are increasingly worrisome. Despite the disclosure of experiences with Islamophobia, this study revealed that overall, Muslim international students from MENA nations attending a rural, public institution in Maine have encountered positive academic and social experiences and believe that both the institution and surrounding communities are welcoming, friendly and safe.

The findings in this study strengthen the previous research associated with international students studying in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2017g; Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Pyrazli & Lopez, 2007, Poyrazli S, Arbona C., Bullington R., & Pisecco S. (2001). The majority of participants in this study preferred the United States as their primary destination for degree attainment due to the reputation for excellence in education and research,

enhanced technology, access to resources; and greater career opportunities (Heyn, 2013; Institute of International Education, 2016b). Furthermore, data indicates that over one-quarter of all international students in the United States are enrolled in STEM related programs (Institute of International Education, 2017g), and the preponderance of those interviewed for this study also seek degrees in science and technology.

Most extensively researched are the transition challenges that international students encounter particularly in the areas of establishing relationships and language development (Arthur, 2002; Althan, 1994; Al-Darmaki and Sayed, 2009; Brown, 2012; Heyn, 2013; Pederson, 1991; Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, et al, 2001). Differing from previous research, challenges with developing peer relationships were not reported by the participants interviewed. Although a few participants arrived on campus joining family or friends already established in the community, others shared forming connections with ease and relative immediacy. Many of these relationships were founded within the Muslim community, however others reported linked through their living or academic environments. Similarly, the findings of this study underscore obstacles related language acquisition, however the limitations reported impacted academic performance, specifically related to academic language and time constraints associated with assignments and not a factor in accessing or participating in academic or social activities (Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014).

Specifically to Muslim students studying at institutions of higher education in the United States, this study corroborated research by Abualkhair (2013), Hanassab (2006), Hart (2016), Peek (2003), and Tummala-Narra & Claudius (2013) revealing discrimination experienced by Muslims, and more likely involving those international students from the MENA region (Hanassab, 2006). Similarly, the incidents of discrimination and bias revealed by participants of

this study described situations based on their nation of origin and not necessarily their religion. Also, despite discrimination and negative stereotypes commonly portrayed in the media, participants feel positive about the supports and resources offered by the institution and feel safe and welcomed within the community.

Complex Stressors

The descriptions gained from this study promote a deeper understanding of the complexity of the challenges that face Muslim international students enrolled at U.S. institutions during a period of political and social uncertainty. Already analyzed and described, this subsection offers meaning to the themes illuminating awareness to the many compounding stressors that are woven throughout the findings and ultimately contributing to the lived experiences of participants. Despite finding a friendly and safe community, participants face a persistent undercurrent of concern as the nature of Islamophobia is seemingly embedded in American society and as a result of ongoing civil unrest in their nation of origin. In addition, participants are experiencing physical and emotional distress stemming from unforeseen academic challenges within defined time constraint. Furthermore, the majority of participants have additional responsibilities for their immediate families that are prioritized over all else. Managing these stressors and finding balance is vital to success. These complex, yet differing concerns for safety have created levels of stress unique this population

Safety

Of significance is was the underlining and persistent concern for safety. Consistently confronted with media reports of unrest throughout the Middle East, stereotypes defining terrorists, reports of hate crimes on the rise, and rapidly changing immigration policies that prolong stressors and impact experiences, Muslim international students shared a heightened

vigilance to issues of both emotional and physical safety. Participants disclosed individual incidents of discrimination associated with ethnicity and religion, as well as, persistent worry embracing perceived and anticipated threats to family.

Regarding issues of safety and unique to participants from Iraq, concerns for family remaining behind or anticipated safety issues upon their return home were exposed. Speaking extensively about the years of on-going war and “another generation destroyed,” participants shared heartbreaking stories of destruction, fear for threats of harm toward their families remaining back home, and future worries of “kidnapping and injury” for the children upon returning home after completing their degree. As several participants from Iraq described incidents of concern, they were also hesitant to identify the behavior as discriminating, stating, “is that related to discrimination or something or is that just bad luck” and also voicing a level of tolerance for “very, very small isolated comments...but we don’t remember” for negative interactions. Having experienced decades of war and oppression within their home nation, may be an influencing factor as if qualifying the degree of the interaction based on their safety.

For Saudi participants where years of civil unrest did not factor into the experience, non-acceptance of discriminating behavior was more direct and forthcoming. Highlighting a differing qualification and level of tolerance for confronting issues within the community, one participant exclaims, “I never just walk away” from discrimination, yet in contrast, incidents involving law enforcement create a higher level of concern. Perceived to be profiled based on country of origin, interactions with airport law enforcement created a level of anxiety and fear as a result of enduring extended detainment, inappropriate and abusive communications and humiliating treatment during travel. Nevertheless, with experiences described as “devastating,”

“intentional,” “scary,” and “should not be allowed, the persistent stress of precaution and anticipation cannot be minimized.

Family

In Muslim communities throughout the MENA nations, the family is the central and most prominent social unit and is religiously and culturally valued. In order to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the culture, family structure should be considered an integral element in developing and offering support. Every participant indicated the importance of having strong family support as exemplified by, “we are better prepared to live here when we have family.” Further underscoring their importance and enrichening the findings, each participant shared numerous descriptions reinforcing their interdependence with the inclusion and frequency of the words ‘family’, ‘friends’, ‘husband’, and ‘wife’ in all areas of the academic and social experiences, and the focus of their needs. Whether nuclear or extended, for these participants, family is their primary support and their priority.

Divinely sanctioned, Muslim family relationships are primarily based on religious and traditional values promoting a strong connection in family and community (Henry and Fouad, 2007). Maintaining strong ties with family is an important aspect embedded in their lifestyle. Simply stated, “Since day one...the family is number one.” For international students studying abroad the loss of the social connection due to geography, culinary differences and financial pressures are difficult (McLachlan & Justice (2009) and may negatively impact their adjustment and overall success. For married participants, the additional factors requiring consideration in achieving balance in their academic and personal lives also included understanding and accessing healthcare, public school enrollment for their children, and building social networks for the spouses. In addition, while participants described having many social activities available,

few attended as most “did not include my family” and limited their involvement within the university community. Under the collective purview of family, every participant identified their foundational support for advice, knowledge and coping remained rooted with members of their identified family system.

Islamophobia

This study specifically sought to explore the lived experiences of Muslim international students enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States against the backdrop of Islamophobia. One of the premier assumptions was that Muslim international students have experienced adverse interactions as a result of the negative perceptions of their religion.

Primarily identifying media as the impetus to providing an ongoing and distorted perception of their home nations and religion, every participant voiced an acute and persistent awareness that they are perceived as a possible threat and an enemy of the community.

Extensively documented is a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment and crimes of hate throughout the United States. Despite participants overwhelmingly believe the community is friendly and safe, there were distinct recognitions that “political impacts now is different” and worry that incidents of hate “will continue to rise.” Deeply institutionalized, the message to fear Muslims is widely depicted in news coverage, political campaigns, movies, within governmental policies in the most recent Executive Order commonly referred to the ‘Muslim ban.’ Participants repeatedly described a heightened alert and increased anxiety when acts of terror are reported in media. As with any period of extended stress, the impact to one’s physical and emotional health is of grave concern.

Summary of Complex Stressors

The literature has revealed that international students face specific pressures in adapting to their new situation and lifestyle (Mori, 2000), particularly with academic and personal life balance (Vaez & Juhari, 2017). Although institutions of higher education offer a variety of services designed to strengthen the skills needed to cope with the many challenges that arise, studies have shown a low frequency of accessing campus counseling centers (Yoon & Jepson, 2008; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). Likewise, each participant in this study specifically denied accessing counseling center supports in managing stress or coping with challenges.

As institutions of higher education in the United States continue to place emphasis on achieving excellence in diversity and inclusion they must be willing to explore the unique cultural implications for establishing effective programs, services and partnerships that provide an opportunity for students to flourish. For Muslim international students from the Middle East and North African nations, understanding their unique stressors and the protective factor of family, are keys to understanding and enhancing their academic and social experiences.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the data gathered for this study was subjective and the findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Although the university is a large, public research institution, and the study allowed for participants from 19 nations, the institution did not have an international student population that represented all of eligible nations and therefore limiting the eligible participant pool. In addition, using a snowball method of recruitment, participants referred their peers which resulted in all participants representing only two countries of origin. Furthermore, identifying Muslim individuals willing to share their experiences during heightened political and social hostilities may have limited this study, and as such, building

relationships within the population and affiliated organizations may benefit participant recruitment. The small target population and recruitment challenges further impacted the goal of obtaining a sample representing variation in nationality and sex among participants.

The Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval process for this study and national immigration policy changes embraced similar timeframes. This study was approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) following the initial and revised Executive Orders (Daily Comp. Pres. Docs., 2017) and during the period of pending litigation creating confusion with immigration policies and impacting participant recruitment.

Although minimized by journaling, self-reflection and reflective listing, researcher bias is a limitation of this study.

Recommendations

The purpose of the study was two-fold; gain an understanding into the experiences of Muslim international students and to obtain insight into their perceived needs that would enhance their overall experiences while studying in the United States. Guided by the findings of this study, there are several recommendations to be considered for enhancing the experience of Muslim international students and promoting a supports and promotes a culturally sensitive, respectful, and inclusive community.

Leaders in higher education are tasked with navigating complex needs for diverse audiences toward providing a safe and inclusive environment for all. As such, institutional leadership will benefit from engaging in an authentic dialogue that is ongoing and collaborative towards developing a sense of caring and value to Muslim international students within the community. Furthermore, having regular and consistent contact and access to top officials'

offers simple and positive interactions which invites engagement and demonstrates an understanding for a community that feels essentially misunderstood.

The fundamental sources of support for Muslim international students at this institution are founded in relationships. Participants consistently identified family, religious practice and staff in the Office of International Student Programs, as keys to feeling valued, appreciated, understood and cared for resulting in the foundations of their positive experiences. Mirroring these relationships, the university and community leaders will benefit from reviewing the experiences and findings in this study and increasing the awareness and understanding of the cultural importance of developing and maintaining connections in expanding the systems of support.

Designed to help students successfully transition to a university environment, orientation programs have long been considered the pathway for enhancing student retention and success (Tinto, 1987). Prior to arrival, offering opportunities for international students and their families to obtain pertinent information about navigating transportation, healthcare, and public school registration within the U.S. and local community allows for advanced planning to enhance their initial transition needs. In addition, incorporating a diversity and inclusion training into time-honored orientation programs for all students would be beneficial in establishing institutional expectations for respecting religious and cultural difference.

With family already established as a priority and the primary source of support, increasing opportunities for family inclusion is essential for the academic success of the international student. Recognizing the unique needs of international families and understanding the benefits of feeling connected within the community, intentional programs and social opportunities for engaging spouses and partners would enhance adjustment and minimize

feelings of isolation. Developing a forum for spouses and partners to connect and support each other, foster new relationships, and provide a safe environment to learn and practice English would require minimal institutional efforts and yield positive results. In addition, creating a mentor program for navigating campus resources and accessing supplies and services upon arrival would also offer assistance with adjusting to life in the United States.

Accessing food goes beyond driving two hours to obtain Halal items, as the challenges of availability are inclusive to the institution and community. Participants have limited meal options within the university dining halls, the student union marketplace or restaurants. Offering a broader variety of food options, both on campus and within the greater community, invites students and their families to feel welcomed and at home in the community.

Offering enhanced cultural learning opportunities for faculty and key department staff based on degree enrollment on practices of support and diversity to enhance relationships and inclusion. Further understanding the intricacies of government scholarship requirements that serve as rigid pathways and time constraints for degree completion. Encouraging discussions amongst academic and offering awareness to real and perceived differences between conversational and academic language and the barriers in gaining a thorough assessment of knowledge and increased stressors related to time for work completion with each impacting overall performance.

Future Research

This dissertation highlighted the lived experiences and complexities facing Muslim international students from the Middle East and North Africa region and the importance of establishing meaningful relationships within the greater community. With the current body of

knowledge limited, this study underscores the need for continued examination of the experiences of this subgroup of international students as the political and social climate surrounding such issues as national security, immigration and religious diversity continues to change at a rapid pace. Within the context of these changes and the limited research already available, the possibilities for future research are both rich and vast.

This study aimed to explore the meaning of the lived experiences of a unique sub-group of international students attending a public institution in the rural Northeast during a period of heightened Islamophobia. With participants clearly articulated concern for safety prior to arrival, and a few participants experienced a few community based incidents were shared and moreover expressed comfort within the community. Furthermore, several of their greatest stressors impacting their experiences were related to access to supplies, services and programming. As access to reliable transportation, resources and supplies was considered necessary in meeting family needs and reducing stress, conducting a similarly designed study in a more urban environment would further enrich the growing body of knowledge.

Although participants believe the community is friendly and safe, some described encountering negative interactions as a result of their religion, language or national origin. While one participant noted an incident involving the hijab worn by Muslim women as a symbol of modesty, most incidents were attributed to the country of origin and Arab culture. As this study only embraced participants from the Arab Middle East, worthy of consideration for further research is whether or not, the lived experiences encountered are a result of Islamophobia and their Islamic faith or independent of their religion, and more associated with Arabophobia and their Arab culture.

Future researchers may wish to use an intersectional approach in further exploring how Muslim international students navigate within various social systems. Knowing that lived realities are shaped by various factors and social dynamics interacting together, there is merit in recognizing and understanding these influences in building collaborative relationships and transforming experiences. Furthermore, when speaking of Muslim international students attending an institution in the United States, there is great value in also considering the influences in the relationships between differing governments and the United States and how these relationships shape perceptions and experiences for Muslim international students from various nations. Moreover, understanding the external, political relationships between the nations within the Middle East and North Africa region also add complexities to privilege and oppression. Each of these factors offer compounding and complexity worthy of further exploration.

Conclusion

While sharing their experiences and needs, Muslim international students participating in this study have offered an expanded understanding of their academic and social experiences. Despite their complex challenges and unique needs, each participant shared stories of persistence, resilience and overall success. This phenomenological study has highlighted unique stressors specific to a subgroup of international students providing institution and community leaders with clear pathways to addressing unmet needs and exploring additional services and supports that enhance success. This study opens the door for understanding the needs for future research and the imperative for how institutions of higher education embrace diversity and continue efforts toward inclusion.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter to Organizations for Recruiting Participants

Dear (Organization),

My name is Donna Seppy and I am a doctoral student in Counselor Education in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. I am writing to ask for your assistance in identifying participants for my dissertation research study entitled: *Muslim International Students and Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Students' Experiences against a Backdrop of Islamophobia*. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students from Middle East and North Africa nations enrolled in the University of Maine.

I understand that your records are confidential; however, I am requesting that your office send my letter of invitation (attached) to these students served by your office, and include the Informed Consent form (attached). This letter may be distributed by email. Upon initial contact with me, I will confirm eligibility and schedule an interview at a location convenient for the student. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time. All identifying information was held in the strictest of confidence.

For your information, I am seeking Muslim international students who meet the following six criteria:

1. Must be at least 18 years of age;
2. Citizen from one of the following nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestine Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen;

3. Self-identifies Allah as the “one and only true God” and/or practitioner of Islam;
4. Pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree (*excluding English language instruction*)
5. Full-time registered international student attending the University of Maine;
6. Completed at least one academic year at UMaine in any program of study.

If you have questions, I can be reached at 207-992-3322 or email at

donna.seppy@maine.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Sandra Caron at the University of Maine in the Human Development & Family Studies program. Her phone number is 207-581-3138 and Dr. Caron’s email is scaron@maine.edu. For questions about rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones at the Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 207-581-1498 or by email at gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu.

Thank you for your assistance with my research!

Sincerely,

Donna Seppy

Appendix B

Letter of Invitation to Participants

Greetings. As-salam-o-alaikum. My name is Donna Seppy and I am a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. I am seeking volunteers to participate in a research study entitled: *Muslim International Students and Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Students' Experiences against a Backdrop of Islamophobia*. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students from Middle East and North Africa nations enrolled in the University of Maine.

My study is driven by my own personal experiences with living, studying and working outside of the United States and my professional experiences with supporting international students in higher education in America. Your voice is vital to understanding the meaning of your experiences while studying at UMaine and are valuable to institutions of higher education, community organizations, and others who seek to support a successful and positive experience.

The Office of International Programs, The Office of Multicultural Student Life and the Islamic Center are assisting me in identifying participants and are forwarding this letter on my behalf. I am looking for participants who meet the following six criteria:

1. Must be at least 18 years of age;
2. Citizen from one of the following nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestine Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen;
3. Self-identifies Allah as the “one and only true God” and/or practitioner of Islam;

4. Pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree (*excluding English language instruction*);
5. Full-time registered international student attending the University of Maine;
6. Completed at least one academic year at UMaine in any program of study.

If you meet these criteria I invite you to participate. You will be asked to take part in an interview that will be digitally recorded for audio. The interview may take up to 90 minutes at a location convenient for you. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. In addition, there are no known risks to participation in this study. Attached is an Informed Consent document that provides further details about this study, guidelines for confidentiality and pertinent contact information.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please call my personal cell phone number 207-992-3322 or my email is donna.seppy@maine.edu. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Sandra Caron at the University of Maine in the Human Development & Family Studies program. Her phone number is 207-581- 3138 and email is scaron@maine.edu.

Thank you for considering this invitation.

Sincerely,

Donna Seppy

Appendix C

Informed Consent

*Muslim International Students and Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Students'
Experiences against a Backdrop of Islamophobia.*

Donna Seppy, Doctoral Candidate in Counselor Education

University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469

donna.seppy@maine.edu

207-992-3322

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Donna Seppy, a doctoral student in Counselor Education at the University of Maine. The faculty sponsor for this study is Dr. Sandra Caron. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences and perceived needs of Muslim international students from Middle East and North Africa nations enrolled in the University of Maine. Your involvement in this study will help university administrators to better understand and respond to the needs of Muslim international students in the United States. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What Will You Be Asked To Do? If you decide to participate, you will be scheduled for an interview that will be audio recorded and later transcribed. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes at a location convenient for you. I am interested in knowing your point of view about your experience as a Muslim international student attending the University of Maine. The following general statements will guide my interview.

- How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?

- How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and community?
- How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?

Risks. A risk associated with this study may be discomfort in speaking about difficulty experiences. These risks will be minimized by allowing the interview to progress at a comfortable pace for the participant and by allowing the participant to decline to answer any question or discontinue the interview at any point.

Benefits. You may benefit from sharing your thoughts and experiences. The results of this research study will inform staff in higher education environments learn more about the experiences of Muslim International student to better support their success.

Confidentiality. All information supplied in the context of this study will be used to contribute to this research. While excerpts from the interviews will be utilized in the final results and conclusions, you will be assigned a code name to protect your identity. Your name and any identifying information will be kept confidential and not appear in any publications.

All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office and I am the only person with access. Data on my computer will be password protected. My dissertation committee will have access to coded data to ensure the analysis is true to your original words. Coded data will be kept my home office in a locked file cabinet indefinitely for future research.

Email may be used for communication. Although the University's email has many protections, I cannot guarantee that email correspondence is completely secure. Any email correspondence with participants will be deleted after the completion of the interview.

Voluntary. Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information. If you have further questions about this study, please contact me at:

Donna Seppy
11 Pleasant Street
Monmouth, ME 04259
donna.seppy@maine.edu
207-992-3322

You may also reach my faculty advisor on this study at:

Dr. Sandra Caron
Professor of Family Relations/Human Sexuality
Program Coordinator, Human Development & Family Studies
University of Maine, 5749 Merrill Hall, Room 220
Orono, ME 04469
207-581-3138
scaron@maine.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

Gayle Jones
Assistant to the Protection of Human Subjects Review Board University of Maine
207-581-1498
gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu

Appendix D

Participant Contact Survey

(To be filled out by researcher when a possible participant makes initial contact)

Participant Contact Script

Thank you for contacting me about my study. My name is Donna Seppy and I am a doctoral student in Counselor Education at the University of Maine. This study seeks to understand the experiences of Muslim International students at UMaine. I will be interviewing students from Middle East North Africa nations to find out more about these experiences.

As explained in the Informed Consent you received with the letter of invitation to participate, all information you provide will be kept confidential and you will be assigned a code name to protect your privacy. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. Coded data will be kept in my home office in a locked file cabinet indefinitely for future research.

Email may be used for communication. Although the University's email has many protections, I cannot guarantee that email correspondence is completely secure. Any email correspondence with participants will be deleted after the completion of the interview. Do you have any questions?

If you think you might like to participate I need to ask you a few questions to verify eligibility.

Is this OK? ____YES ____NO *(If no, say thank you and end the call).*

Eligibility Criteria

YES NO Are you at least 18 years of age?

YES NO Are you a citizen from one of the following nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Occupied Palestine Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen?

YES NO Do you identify Allah as the “one and only true God” and/or practitioner of Islam?

YES NO Are you pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree (*excluding English language instruction*).

YES NO Are you a full-time registered international student attending the University of Maine?

YES NO Have you completed at least one academic year at UMaine in any program of study?

If “YES” - all criteria are met - ask to schedule an interview.

If ‘NO’ - not all criteria met - inform them they do not meet the criteria; thank them for their interest.

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Research Question: *How do Muslim international students attending an institution of higher education describe their experiences?*

As you know, this study is about “Muslim international student experiences.” I’d like to learn a little about you before you came to the United States and the University of Maine.

- 1) How would you have described your country’s relationship with the United States?
 - a. What did you know about the U.S. before arriving?
 - b. How did you obtain this knowledge?
- 2) How did you decide to come to the U.S. for higher education?
 - a. How did you chose to come to the Maine?
 - b. Did you come alone or with family members?
- 3) What did you think life would be like in the U.S.?
 - a. What did you look forward to?
 - b. What concerns did you have, if any?
 - c. Did you have any fears of discrimination?
- 4) How would you compare your expectations with actual experiences?

Sub-question One - *How do Muslim international students describe their academic experiences attending the University of Maine?*

- 1) What has it been like to be a student here?
 - a. Are there other international students or faculty in your major? Muslim students or faculty?
- 2) How would you describe your classroom experiences at the University of Maine?

- a. What are some academic challenges you have faced while studying here.
 - b. Tell me about your interactions/experiences with various faculty.
 - c. Tell me about your interactions/experiences with other students in class.
 - d. Have there been any experiences of discrimination?
 - i. Any specific challenges of being a Muslim international student
 - e. What have these experiences been like for you?
- 3) Overall, how would you describe your academic experience as a Muslim international student at the University of Maine?

Sub-question Two - *How do Muslim international students describe their social experiences within the university and community?*

- 1) Tell me about your social interactions/experiences since you arrived at UMaine.
 - a. When you're on campus.
 - b. When you're off campus and in the community.
 - c. How friendly/accepting have others (outside academics) been?
- 2) Will you describe any challenges you faced adjusting to living in the U.S./Maine?
 - i. What have these experiences been like for you?
 - b. Have there been any experiences of discrimination?
 - i. Any specific challenges of being a Muslim international student
 - b. What have these experiences been like for you?
- 3) How do you participate in campus or community life (clubs, organizations, groups, public places you visit)?
 - a. How did you learn about these activities/groups?
 - b. How did you choose which activities/groups to participate in?

- c. Have there been any experiences of discrimination?
 - i. Any specific challenges of being a Muslim international student
- d. What have these experiences been like for you?
- e. How has your participation in university life affected your experiences?
- 4) Overall, how would you describe your social experience as a Muslim international student at the University of Maine?

Sub-question Three - *How do Muslim international students describe their perceived needs for enhancing their collegiate experiences?*

- 1) What strengths/strategies do you possess that has supported your success?
 - a. In what ways have these strengths/strategies supported you?
- 2) What campus resources/services/programs have you used at UMaine?
 - a. How did these services/programs meet or not meet your needs/expectations?
 - b. What were these experiences like for you?
- 3) Who are the people/organizations that you have reached out to for support?
 - a. How have they meet (or not meet) your needs/expectations?
- 4) What advice would you give to other Muslim international students to help them be more prepared to live and go to school here?
 - a. Why is this important/beneficial?
- 5) Based on your experiences, what suggestions do you have for academic/community leaders that might better support Muslims International students?
- 6) Overall, how would you describe the support and services available for a Muslim international student at the University of Maine?

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Donna M. Seppy was born in Izmir, Turkey and moved extensively, both domestic and abroad, throughout her life. She attended high school in Maine before earning an undergraduate degree in Business Administration and Economics from the New England College in West Sussex, England. She also earned a Master's in degree in Counselor Education from the University of Maine.

For almost 25 years, Donna has worked in higher education and mental health environments supporting others in achieving their academic and personal goals. In higher education, Donna has worked in the areas of admissions, residence life, student support services, counseling, and as adjunct faculty. For three years, she was a volunteer for EducationUSA, a program of the United States State Department, supporting international students in accessing higher education in the United States. In addition, she volunteered with Literacy Volunteers as an English Conversation Partner. She is also a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor in Maine.

Donna and her family live in Monmouth, Maine and she currently works for the University of Maine System in Student Affairs. She is a Teaching Assistant at the University of Maine at Augusta in the Mental Health and Human Services program.

Donna began her doctoral studies at the University of Maine in Counselor Education in 2007. Donna is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education from the University of Maine in May 2018.