Sense of Belonging and Mattering

Research Report No. 1

USCRossier

*Center for Education,
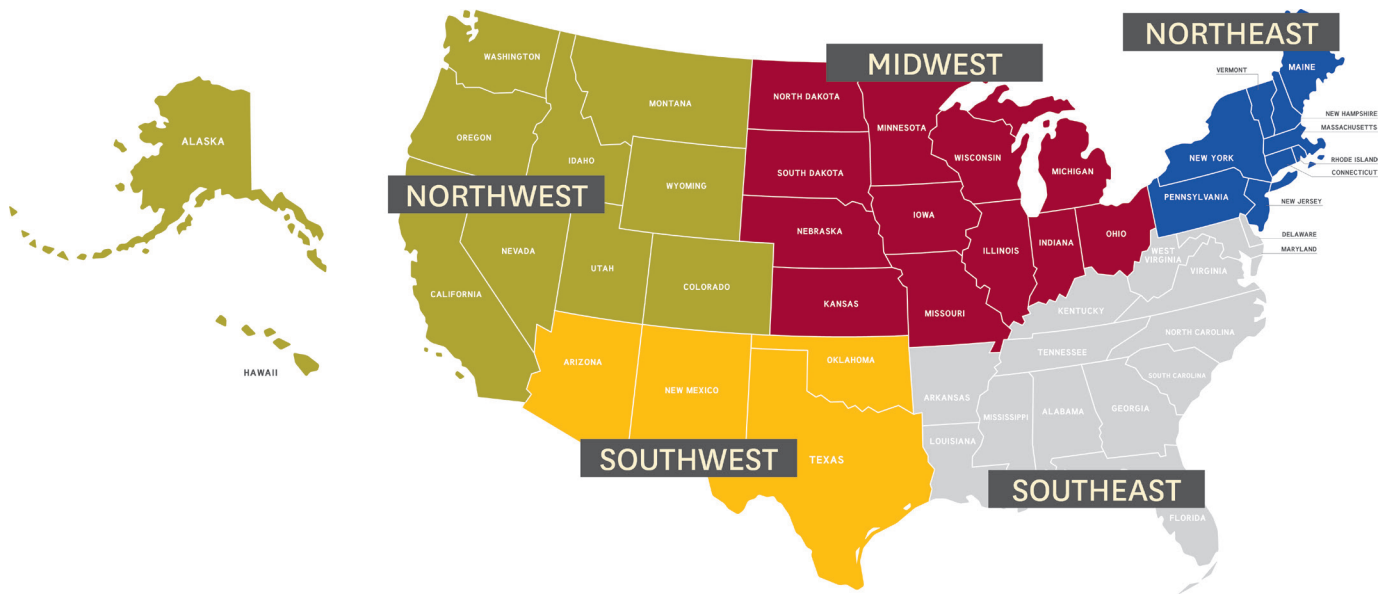Identity and Social Justice*

Study Overview

In 2017, there was a precipitous increase in the institutionalization of Islamophobia under the guise of national security, and institutions of higher education were not exempt. Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Muslim college students experienced a significant increase in hate crimes on campus, which was impacted by the national legal and political climate (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). From the criminalization of Muslim college students' exercise of First Amendment rights to the Muslim Bans, colleges and universities are in a position to ensure socially just and inclusive environments, particularly as the enforcement of these laws can negatively impact how Muslim students experience college. While the current political climate has brought the conversation about Islamophobia to the forefront, this is not a new phenomenon. A common thread of Muslim college students' experiences is navigating stigma and stereotypes laced with Islamophobic rhetoric. Fostering a socially just campus requires a greater understanding of Muslim college students and the extent to which they feel that they belong and matter to their respective campus communities.

Funded by the USC Zumberge Diversity and Inclusion in Research Award, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of Muslim students enrolled in higher education institutions across the country. We targeted a participant sample of undergraduate and graduate students at 2-year and 4-year institutions who are currently enrolled in four major regions of the United States: Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest. Using mixed methods, two research questions guided the study: 1) How do Muslim students perceive their sense of belonging and mattering on campus?; and 2) To what extent does the organizational/structural features of campus climate relate to Muslim students' experiences on campus? And what extent does membership or involvement in a campus community mediate students' sense of belonging?

MAP

Our research study focused on recruiting participants from states in four major regions in the United States: Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest.

PARTICIPANTS BY REGION

QUALITATIVE

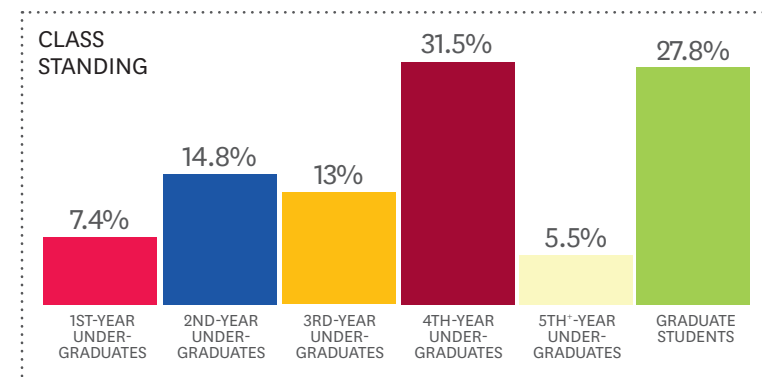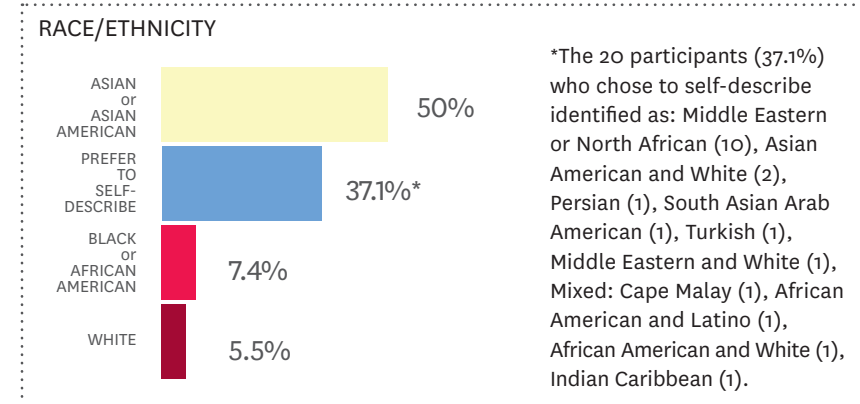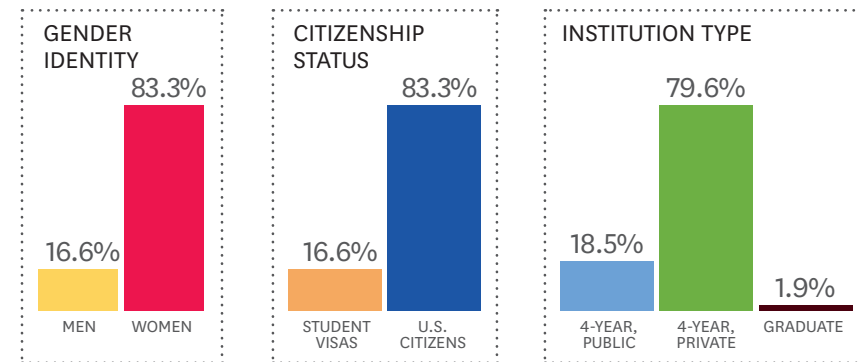| 14.8% NORTHWEST	31.5% SOUTHWEST	31.5% MIDWEST	22.2% NORTHEAST

QUANTITATIVE

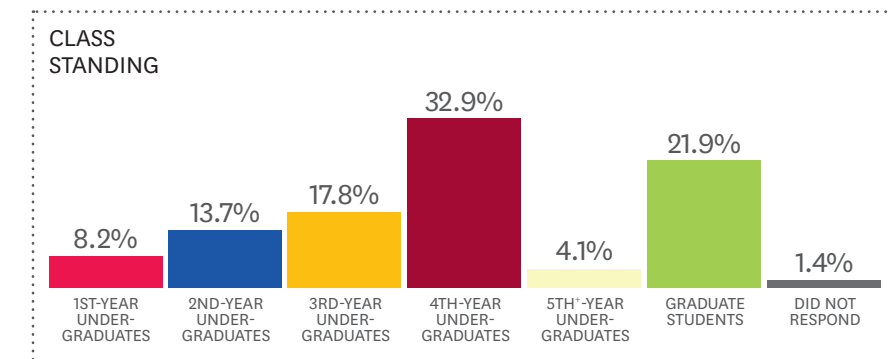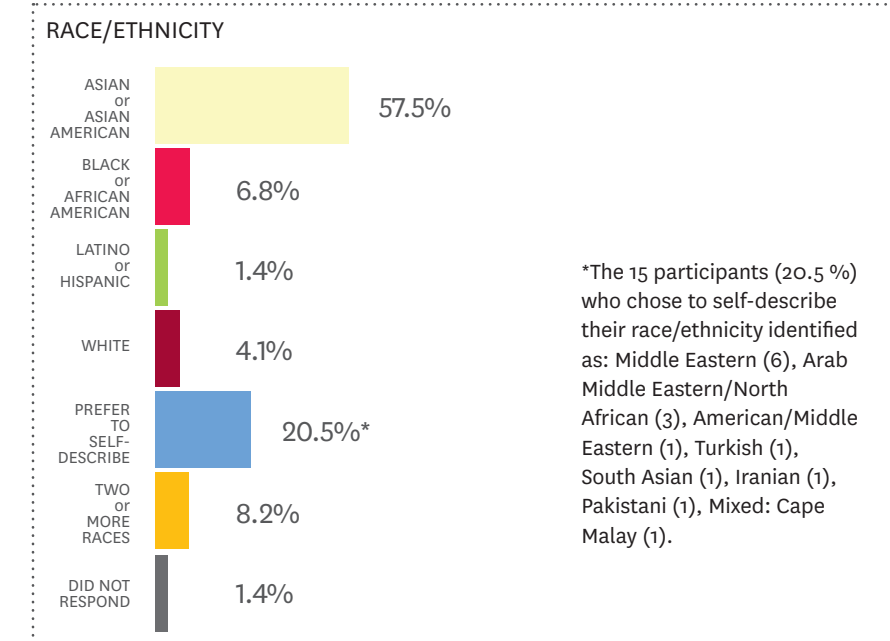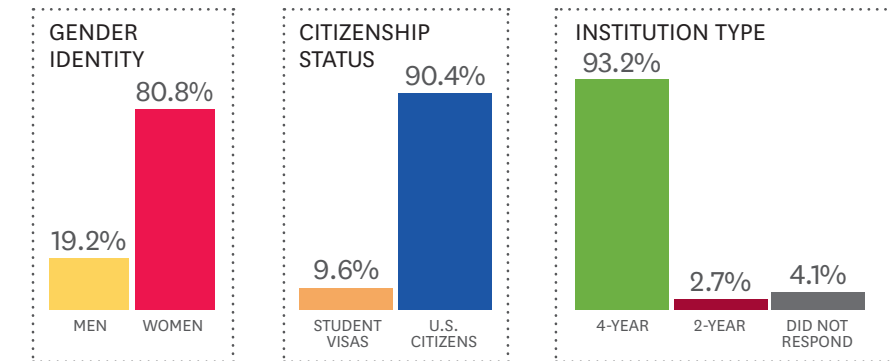| 16.4% NORTHWEST	32.9% SOUTHWEST	31.5% MIDWEST	16.4% NORTHEAST	2.7% DID NOT RESPOND

Who Participated in the Study?

QUALITATIVE

A total of 54 students participated in a 45-60 minute semi-structured interview. Prior to participating in an interview, each student completed a demographics intake form where they were asked their gender identity, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, institution, class standing, and institution type. For all questions, participants had the option to select from a list or write in their own response.

GENDER IDENTITY
- MEN: 16.6%
- WOMEN: 83.3%

CITIZENSHIP STATUS
- STUDENT VISAS: 16.6%
- U.S. CITIZENS: 83.3%

INSTITUTION TYPE
- 4-YEAR, PUBLIC: 18.5%
- 4-YEAR, PRIVATE: 79.6%
- GRADUATE: 1.9%

RACE/ETHNICITY
- ASIAN or ASIAN AMERICAN: 50%
- PREFER TO SELF-DESCRIBE: 37.1%*
- BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN: 7.4%
- WHITE: 5.5%

*The 20 participants (37.1%) who chose to self-describe identified as: Middle Eastern or North African (10), Asian American and White (2), Persian (1), South Asian Arab American (1), Turkish (1), Middle Eastern and White (1), Mixed: Cape Malay (1), African American and Latino (1), African American and White (1), Indian Caribbean (1).

CLASS STANDING
- 1ST-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 7.4%
- 2ND-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 14.8%
- 3RD-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 13%
- 4TH-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 31.5%
- 5TH+-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 5.5%
- GRADUATE STUDENTS: 27.8%

QUANTITATIVE

A total of 79 students participated in the online survey with 73 valid responses. There are 76 questions in the survey, in which 27 items are short-answer questions and 49 are multiple choice questions.

GENDER IDENTITY
- MEN: 19.2%
- WOMEN: 80.8%

CITIZENSHIP STATUS
- STUDENT VISAS: 9.6%
- U.S. CITIZENS: 90.4%

INSTITUTION TYPE
- 4-YEAR: 93.2%
- 2-YEAR: 2.7%
- DID NOT RESPOND: 4.1%

RACE/ETHNICITY
- ASIAN or ASIAN AMERICAN: 57.5%
- BLACK or AFRICAN AMERICAN: 6.8%
- LATINO or HISPANIC: 1.4%
- WHITE: 4.1%
- PREFER TO SELF-DESCRIBE: 20.5%*
- TWO or MORE RACES: 8.2%
- DID NOT RESPOND: 1.4%

*The 15 participants (20.5 %) who chose to self-describe their race/ethnicity identified as: Middle Eastern (6), Arab Middle Eastern/North African (3), American/Middle Eastern (1), Turkish (1), South Asian (1), Iranian (1), Pakistani (1), Mixed: Cape Malay (1).

CLASS STANDING
- 1ST-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 8.2%
- 2ND-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 13.7%
- 3RD-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 17.8%
- 4TH-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 32.9%
- 5TH+-YEAR UNDER-GRADUATES: 4.1%
- GRADUATE STUDENTS: 21.9%
- DID NOT RESPOND: 1.4%

Outreach and Data Collection

In order to be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) identify as Muslim, 2) 18 years of age or older, and 3) currently enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student in one of our four targeted U.S. regions. We began outreach and participant recruitment in September 2018. The first round of outreach started with a search of multiple campus' student organizations, research centers, diversity initiatives, cultural centers, and academic departments. Specifically, we looked up the contact information for the Muslim Student Association or Organization chapters at each campus as well as other student organizations such as the Black Student Union and the Muslim Law Student Association. Our search also identified potential faculty, department chairs, and research affiliates whose work aligns with our project or who may have high contact with Muslim students. Once we compiled a contact list for each institution, we sent email invitations to distribute for participation, which included our study's information flyer and how students can participate. Students were then able to sign up for an interview and/or invited to complete our survey electronically.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Once students signed up for an interview on our online form, their response was recorded on a spreadsheet. Interested participants were contacted and notified about their scheduled interview date and time via email. Participants were also provided with links for two required forms: a study information form and a participant demographics form. The study information form ensured that the participants were aware of and understood the aims of the study. The participant demographics form allowed the participant to answer personal demographic information to ensure they were eligible to participate in the study, as well as select a pseudonym in order to protect their identity. Interviews were conducted over the phone in various conference rooms at the USC campus. Interview questions covered topics such as Muslim identity, college experiences, activism, opinions on laws and policies, and online experiences. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder app on a tablet or smartphone.

REGION	OUTREACH MESSAGES SENT	TOTAL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL INSTITUTIONS REPRESENTED
Southwest	339	17	3
Midwest	120	17	2
Northeast	244	12	6
Northwest	144	8	1
TOTAL	847	54	12

OUTREACH EFFORT	NUMBER OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS
Flyer on-campus	3
Did not recall or did not wish to state	3
Student group chat	4
Email (did not disclose sender)	4
Faculty, staff or department	10
Friend or family member	13
Muslim student group communication	17

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Students contacted our research team through email to request the link for the electronic survey. Once interested students confirmed that they met the eligibility to participate in the study, they were sent the link to complete the electronic survey. Additionally, when interview participants communicated with us via email and phone, we offered them the link to participate in the electronic survey. The survey questions asked about demographic information, Muslim identity, veiling, perceptions and experiences on their campus, and online experiences.

Theme #1: Between Two Worlds

Participants in the study discussed how they navigate their Muslim identities within different spaces and contexts. While they are perceived as either "just Muslim" or "not Muslim enough" within and outside of their Muslim communities among markers of race, ethnicity, sexuality, dress, and gender — to be whole, they want their various social identities to coexist. They do not want to lose one social identity or the other just to fit neatly into a predetermined "box." Additionally, students described their involvement with the Muslim Student Association/Union at their campus with some participants feeling disconnected from the student organization. Students in the study demonstrated how they live between two worlds as they navigate their campus community. Du Bois (1903) described double consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others…," two identities into one (pg. 3). Similarly, Muslim students often felt like they were between two worlds as they negotiated the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims within their campus community.

AMONG FELLOW MUSLIMS

Religious Knowledge and Practice

The majority of participants shared that they were born into a Muslim family. A common theme among the participants was the idea of being culturally Muslim with many explaining how they practiced and the extent to which they were or were not knowledgeable about Islam. Zainab, a graduate student at an institution in the Northwest explained:

> "Yeah, so I've been Muslim my whole life, and my parents were Muslim. My dad's Iranian, so I grew up in the culture. But my parents never taught me specifics of prayer or anything like that. So, I guess for a lot of Muslims, I'm not a real Muslim, but for me, hearing the *azan* or hearing *suras*, it's still – something that's really meaningful to me, even if I don't really know all the deeper meanings. I'm going to hold onto that identity even if other people say that it's (laughs), you know, not accurate…"

Zainab highlights how within the Muslim community, she may not be seen as a fully practicing Muslim because she is not fully aware of various religious practices. Zainab acknowledges that she may be viewed differently when

Muslim students often felt like they were between two worlds as they negotiated the perceptions of Muslims and non-Muslims within their campus community.

compared to someone else who is well-versed in religious practices and prayers. Similarly, other students described themselves as "moderate" Muslims. When asked what was meant by "moderate Muslim," Aziza, a fourth-year student at an institution in the Southwest explained:

> "I do wear the *hijab*, but I wouldn't say that I'm super active in, like religious [activities] – for instance, I don't go to the Friday prayer every week, but I try to. I don't pray all five prayers a day, but I do try to observe most of the rules or I try to be a good Muslim."

While religious knowledge and engagement seem to create distance or affiliation within the community of Muslim students, the choices students make to become affiliated with Muslim-specific organizations appear to rest on an intersection of social identities, in addition to religious knowledge and engagement.

Muslim Student Organizations

Most students mentioned how Muslim Student Associations/Unions (MSA/MSU) felt like a family and community. These student organizations provide a space to pray and the strength to "hold on to your identity," creating a sense of belonging to a community. However, students also described MSA and MSU as "cliquey," which caused some to feel like they did not belong in the community. When Zainab was asked if there was anything that prevented her from getting involved with the Muslim Student Association on her campus, she expressed:

> "The space doesn't feel welcoming a lot of the time. It does tend to be – more geared towards Arabs and Pakistani Muslims – they forget about everyone else. Yeah, it's also very *Sunni*-centric and not super-geared towards welcoming *Shia* Muslims. Yeah, those are the main reasons why. I had some friends who were in MSA who were *hijabis*, and some of them would be kind of judgy with me at times about not wearing *hijab*. (sighs) And it's just not energy that I want to be around all the time."

The focus on Arab and Pakistani Muslims, as well as the high concentration of *Sunni* Muslims, left some students unsettled and without a religious community with which they could identify. Despite the availability of religious specific organizations like the MSA/MSU, many students shared how members were not always welcoming to Muslims from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. Zainab recounts an interaction she had with one of the MSA members:

> "I had a weird moment when I was in undergrad…the club for queer Muslims was still active, and I was in the student activity center printing out a poster for our club. This Muslim girl from MSA sees me, and she sees the poster that I'm printing. She starts questioning me about it in a way that really freaked me out. It just felt kind of aggressive."

Zainab highlights her negative encounter with MSA members and illustrates that in addition to the ostracization that Muslims experience among the non-Muslim campus community, Muslim students also have to navigate being accepted into Muslim-specific organizations.

Being Accepted

Choi, a graduate student at an institution in the Northwest, discussed the perceptions and responses from others toward her veiling practice. She shared that prior to arriving in the U.S., she was able to wear whichever color she wanted for her *hijab*. She asserted:

> "When I [came] here, because I read [the] news and then I watched [the] news and people who wear *hijab* usually get persecuted – in the street – so I started to wear very colorful *hijabs* – it has flowers on it or like colorful… it's like very friendly and very fresh so that people are not afraid of me. So people appreciate or give compliments about my *hijab* – like oh, your *hijab* is so beautiful, because it has flowers on it and it's so colorful…But sometimes I got, like, people in the street, especially [the] homeless [say] 'get back to your country' or like 'fuck Muslims' in front of me. I accept that but, I don't know whether it's related to my *hijab* or it's related to my [racial/ethnic] identity."

Choi discussed how the "persecutions" of Muslim women who wear *hijab* that she saw on the news influenced her decision to wear the floral, colorful *hijab* so that people would not fear her. Despite the compliments she received, Choi is aware of the potential threat to her safety due to Islamophobic ideologies, which is discussed in more detail in the next theme. Choi ponders whether the slurs that she received are due to her veiling or other aspects of her identity, alluding to the multiple burdens many Muslim students carry because of their other social identities like race, ethnicity, and gender.

Choi and Zainab's experiences indicate how some Muslim students are in constant threat of being scrutinized because of their decision to veil or not. Zainab shared that her decision to refrain from wearing a *hijab* resulted in being judged by members of MSA/MSU. On the other hand, Choi was intentional and strategic about wearing a stylish *hijab* in order to limit fear and consequently to protect herself. Through her careful choice of "friendly and very fresh" *hijabs*, she anticipated getting more positive responses from individuals outside of the Muslim community. Zainab, on the contrary, does not veil and is consequently excluded from campus religious community with fellow Muslim women at her campus questioning her choice to not wear a *hijab*.

Notably, the decision of veiling for Muslim women reflects the person's religious views, the idea of self-presentation, and the understanding of self-identity. The decision is influenced by upbringing and education, peer pressure, and the safety of the surrounding environment. For our participants, modest dress was modified not only as an effort to demonstrate a commitment to Islam but also as a mechanism to limit the amount of fear people outside of the Muslim community may experience. Students who decide not to veil may experience rejection from some members in their community, and as a result, they may not feel like they belong. This finding is, in part, supported within our survey data (i.e., 60.9% of the participants did not veil at the moment when taking the survey). Furthermore, 86.7% of the participants think veiling affects how other people viewed them on campus (see Table 1).

TABLE 1.

DO YOU THINK VEILING AFFECTS HOW YOU ARE VIEWED BY OTHERS ON YOUR CAMPUS?

YES 86.7%   NO 13.3%

These findings show that Muslim students are hyperaware of the various stereotypes that others hold about them. Perhaps most interesting is how they view themselves can be vastly different than how others (some Muslims and non-Muslims) see them, what they think, and expect from them. The mismatch in expectations and misconceptions is more detailed among the non-Muslims discussed in the following section.

Misconceptions and Generalizations

Within the classroom and on their college campuses, students talked about their experiences with actively deconstructing the negative ideas their peers have about them, their religion, and culture. Deniz, a student from the Southwest, shared:

> "But people really think the wrong things about Islam, and when I talk to my classmates from other faiths or people that have never encountered a Muslim before, I try to explain to them; I try to give them examples from the life of Prophet or the *Qur'an*, the holy book of Islam. I try to explain to them that it's not what they see in the media or what they've been presented from others."

Deniz communicates how outside of the Muslim community, Islam is often misunderstood, leaving her with the tasks of upholding and defending her beliefs. Sarah, a third-year student at an institution in the Midwest, explained how her teachers treat her differently since she is Muslim. She described how the Muslim community at her campus is generalized, stereotyped, and expected to behave the same way. Sarah stated:

> "I think we're just grouped. All Muslims are grouped together, that's about it. My professors, they all expect the same behavior from us for some reason. For example, in our university, Muslims are known for cheating just because it's a bunch of guys and girls that [cheated] in the class. So now with the *hijab* you go in, like in chemistry, we're taking a test, they literally watch you. They're staring at you the whole time just because they assume okay, she's Muslim, all the other Muslims have cheated in the past. But that's just specific to our school. But still, they're grouping you with them. They assume we're all the same and we all come from a community where we all do the same thing."

Cheating is wrong, yet it likely occurs in all college campuses. With a high probability, we can assume that if a group of Christian students cheated, that behavior would not be generalized to all Christian students. When a group of Muslim students cheated, as in Sarah's case, it was generalized to all Muslim students, which made her feel that all Muslims were under scrutiny. Such overgeneralizations and misconceptions can harm students' educational experiences, which can produce issues of stereotype threat, mainly when such misconceptions occur in class.
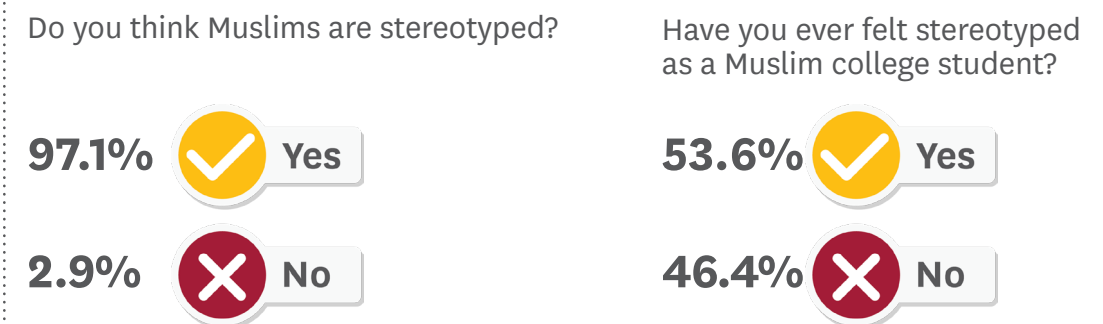
In fact, over 86% of the survey participants reported that they had experienced addressing, confronting, or correcting misconceptions about Muslims and Islam (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.
HAVE YOU EVER HAD TO ADDRESS, CONFRONT, OR CORRECT THESE MISCONCEPTIONS?

YES
86.8%

NO
13.2%

The data also revealed that there was no significant difference between Muslim women and men across these kinds of experiences. Based on student responses, most of the misconceptions can be captured within the following categories: 1) View Muslims or Islam as terrorists/terrorism; 2) Perceive Islam as a violent and intolerant religion; 3) Assume that the Muslim population oppresses women and have arranged marriages. When the survey participants chose to address misconceptions inside or outside the classroom, most had "face-to-face conversations." The second most frequently used strategy was "written dialogue via chat." When discerning the effectiveness of either approach, the participants' rated "face-to-face conversation" and "written dialogue via email" (the third most used strategy) as useful.

TABLE 3.
STEREOTYPES

Do you think Muslims are stereotyped?	Have you ever felt stereotyped as a Muslim college student?
97.1% ✔ Yes	**53.6%** ✔ Yes
2.9% ✘ No	**46.4%** ✘ No

Beyond students' specific experiences, over 97% of the survey participants believe that Muslims, in general, are stereotyped (See Table 3). Fifty-three percent of the participants report that they have felt stereotyped. Although there were no statistically significant differences between Muslim men and women on these measures, female participants were more likely to be differentially treated when they veil. One survey participant stated, "Since I wear a *hijab*, people think that I am forced to wear one and that I am oppressed." Most survey participants, regardless of gender, also indicated that people have stereotypes about their ethnic background, perspectives on gender equality, language proficiency, educational level, marriage choices, and openness and tolerance of others. One participant elaborated, "Because I am Muslim, people expect my English to be bad. They don't expect my vernacular to come off as mature, professional, nor educated. I'm automatically seen as someone who's probably shy or boring. People don't expect me to speak up or express ideas, especially in a classroom setting." Some participants further stated, "[Muslim population] were stereotyped to be violent and radical even though it is only a small group of people who are that radical, just as other radical religious groups all over the world."

Theme #2: Safety

HATE AND THE POLITICAL CLIMATE

Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a Muslim, Somali-American woman, has been the recent subject of hate in the media and the political world, as well as the recipient of death threats from a subset of Americans who do not believe she should be in her leadership position. Equivalently, Muslim undergraduate and graduate students continue to express feeling unsafe and discriminated against on their college campuses. Recently, and since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Muslim students report that they are experiencing the adverse effects of anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies by U.S. political leaders. Hafsah, a second-year undergraduate student at a four-year institution in the Northwest, shared her on-campus experience and the impact of the political climate by explaining,

> "I would definitely say that the political climate has affected how people treat us and how we have to be hyperaware of our safety, and I would say to a certain extent it dictates how public we are with our faith."

Another second-year undergraduate student, Sarah, who attends a four-year institution in the Northeast, summed up her thoughts by stating that while she is not surprised by the current presidential administration's treatment of Muslims, the effects are still fully felt. She continued,

> "I think it's a tough time for all of us because we never expected this administration or government to be accommodating, but I think the attacks that have existed against Congresswoman Ilhan Omar all year have been really difficult for me to fathom, especially when this woman is literally just trying to preach her opinion, just like anyone else."

Sarah added that these "many direct attacks and threats against her [Ilhan Omar's] life, which are literally encouraged by the president of this country" are "indicative of how he feels towards Muslims in the country and, I mean, his travel ban can speak to that." Furthermore, Omar, a graduate student in the Northeast, pointed out that the attacks on the Congresswoman and "linking her to 9/11" make him feel vulnerable. He opined that "So clearly I am affected by this."

The Islamophobic words and actions that are being used in the political arena by U.S. leaders are trickling down to impact the campus environment. Amal, also a graduate student in the Northeast, admitted that "the way that the president has spoken about Ilhan Omar and the threats that he makes, makes it unsafe for Muslims, calling her a terror threat… it's just a matter of feeling like I might not be as safe as I normally am, or that I need to be more on guard." Hafsah has noticed the feeling of being unsafe present among her and her Muslim peers. She shared,

> "The political climate really doesn't help our safety because I feel like the words that come out of Trump's mouth, he kind of allows people to treat people who are different like anyway they want to, and I guess it permits people to treat us like crap. And I've definitely seen evidence of that."

Our participants assert that the political climate in the U.S. is negatively affecting their educational experiences and their sense of safety on campus.

RISE IN ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE SEARCH FOR SAFE SPACES

Terrorist attacks against Muslims both in the U.S. and abroad also impact Muslim students' sense of safety. Undergraduate student Sarah described that there is a "rise in Islamophobia, and so yes, that's made me feel unsafe." Nawab, a fourth-year undergraduate at a four-year institution in the Southwest, explained,

> "The shootings that happened in New Zealand at the mosque… I think that kind of shook everyone a little bit because it was kind of the idea that if that can happen there, then it could happen here too with the growing Islamophobia and white nationalism, and so I think that's a little bit of a concern in the back of everyone's mind. Beyond that, I think just with the increasing rhetoric against Muslims, it's just kind of this background fear that a lot of Muslims, including myself, have of what's going to happen."

The terrorist and violent acts against Muslims and their places of worship in the world makes Muslim students feel unsafe even on-campus here in the U.S.

Muslim students' sense of safety depends on *who* they are surrounded by and *where* they are located on their respective campuses. Noor, a third-year undergraduate in the Northwest, admitted that the racial and ethnic diversity around her on campus impacts her feeling of safety. She stated that if she is in "predominantly white spaces, then I don't find a lot of students of color, people of color in the room, it becomes a little more difficult or more uncomfortable." Fatima, a fourth-year undergraduate in the Southwest, agreed with Noor and said, "I think just spaces where I feel there's more diversity because I think there's definitely been some classes I've taken or just some groups I've been a part of where I feel like there's no diversity, and I feel like I stick out too much. But there's other spaces where it feels like there's a lot of diversity, and I feel more comfortable in those spaces." Deniz, also a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, echoed the feeling that racial and ethnic diversity makes a difference not only within the student community, but with staff as well. Deniz shared,

> "I can say that students or staff members who are from minority groups or groups that have been discriminated against, they are nicer to me. They get my situation, like people could treat me different, so they don't treat me different. They treat me really nice. African-American staff or Hispanic people, they're really nice on campus. But I can't really say the same thing for white Americans."

Zainab also noticed that spaces with people of color feel more comfortable for her:

> "Definitely any sort of space that's majority POC [people of color] I will feel way more comfortable identifying as Muslim. it just seems like there's probably going to be less of a chance of misconceptions or like prejudice in areas that are majority POC, like when I go to the diversity officer meetings and stuff or diversity committee meetings."

The racial and ethnic diversity also translates into physical safe space and feelings of safety. Sitara, a fifth-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, shared that her Ismaili Muslim Student Association feels safe meeting in a particular building on campus. She asserted,

TABLE 4.

How safe do you feel in being part of a Muslim group on campus?

28.8%
Extremely safe

48.5%
Safe

12.1%
Somewhat safe

6.1%
Neither safe nor unsafe

3.0%
Somewhat unsafe

1.5%
Extremely unsafe

"They have a multicultural engagement center within that building, and they have a diversity student office or something in that building as well. Not that we chose that building because those offices and services are in there, but I think that we do feel a sense of safety, acceptance and safe space in which we can meet and use those spaces."

It is clear that *where* Muslim students are on campus, and *who* they are surrounded by, determines their sense of safety. The survey findings show that 95% of the participants feel comfortable identifying themselves as Muslims. Most of the participants feel safe or extremely safe as being part of a Muslim group on campus (see Table 4).

Additionally, over 50% of survey participants at least feel somewhat comfortable talking about religious/political issues with non-Muslim fellow students. However, for our female participants, when talking about their decision to wear the *hijab* or not, some participants mentioned that safety was the main reason for not choosing to veil. One participant stated,

"I have tried to wear *hijab*, but I generally feel less safe/secure. I'm looking to build up my sense of self-assurance and confidence in my abilities and getting the world to acknowledge that before I take on the extra challenge."

Furthermore, Muslim students admitted that they have to assess situations on their campus for safety purposes before deciding whether or not to engage. Graduate student Zainab described her experiences evaluating the people around her in the classroom. She shared,

"There's always a way when you interact with professors or TAs in the beginning, in the first week or so of class where you're trying to assess if they're safe or not. If they're safe with regards to Muslims and people of color, that impacts just seeing how, especially if the professor is white, seeing the way that they talk about people, like minority groups and marginalized identities, like seeing how woke they are, and then once I categorize them, then being like this is someone that I can actually feel okay in this class with really expressing my opinions and really being who I am."

Zainab not only does this in the classroom, but she also makes assessments when considering her attendance at

on-campus events. She explained, "Any instance in which I am in a space that might be more aggressive or negative towards Muslims, so the campus has allowed people like Milo Yiannopoulos to come to campus, and other kinds of white nationalists to come, and those are instances of racism when I feel unsafe." Undergraduate student Sitara's assessment of her Southwest campus has led her to not engage in any forms of protest or activism, despite her interest in doing so. Even though her university does make efforts to "provide extra police officers, they'll provide extra patrols and things like that when they know that these events are happening." Sitara does not "feel like it's enough. I think just being a minority on this campus, I don't feel very safe." Muslim students, therefore, have to be more cautious and selective with how they engage in academic and extracurricular situations on campus.

YOU DON'T GET TO PRESENT YOURSELF AS WHO YOU ARE

Not all Muslim students express that they explicitly feel unsafe. Many students report that they think their non-Muslim peers in the campus community avoid them. This avoidance leads to Muslim students feeling uncomfortable or even excluded by their non-Muslim peer group. For example, undergraduate Deniz shared,

"I think people tend to be distant with me at first if they talk to me, if they're my classmate or something, they get to know me and know what kind of person I am. But if they're not going to talk to me, I'm just walking on the campus, and they see a girl in a *hijab*. They won't take the initiative to talk. I try to smile and give them some positive energy, even if we're just walking by, but most people keep their distance."

Linda, a second-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, echoed Deniz's experience by saying,

"You don't get to present yourself as who you are, so it's harder for people to approach you, and it's kind of hard for you to approach them because of your fear of being judged or just like anxiety in general over someone not liking you because of your religion."

Wansh, a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, agreed that her appearance leads to peers on campus, avoiding her. She explained,

"When someone looks at me, I feel like my outfit is a pretty significant indicator that I'm a Muslim, and I feel like people tend to stay away just by looking at me... And sometimes they make it obvious that they're trying to stay away from you because if you're in a group of people and they're a part of it, and you show up, they purposefully ignore you or talk over you, and they intend not to include you in those conversations, even though other people don't react that way. So, I experienced that a lot."

Graduate student Amal, who attends an institution in the Northeast, has had similar avoidance experiences in the classroom. She noted, "Islamophobic people would be wary of me. Like some people would say problematic things in lectures, and I really wouldn't engage with them." Muslim students are often avoided by their peers on campus because of their Muslim identity and visible religious markers.

I'M NOT WILLING TO GIVE UP: SAFETY VS. WEARING THE HIJAB

The uneasiness and lack of feeling safe on campus, which stems from the current political climate, has translated into Muslim female students considering and reconsidering their choice to veil, or wear *hijab*. Hafsah, an undergraduate student, explained that despite feeling unsafe, she chooses to continue veiling. She shared,

"Even though I would say I had some crazy things happen to me in life, it's still never been enough to push me off of wearing my *hijab* because I feel it's such a big thing for me; it's such a big part of my identity, such a sense of pride that I've never – no matter what the political climate is, no matter what people do to me, I don't know, I just feel like for me it's, like, something I'm not willing to give up."

Sarah struggled with her decision to veil in her first year of college and considered not continuing. However, she realized that veiling is a big part of who she is, and the only reason she would stop veiling is "to appease the people

around me to not feel different than them, because I just wondered how it would be to not be recognized for that right away." For Noor, the current political climate actually prompted her to continue wearing the *hijab* as an undergraduate student in the Northwest:

> "I think what finally did it was actually the 2016 election where I found that regardless of whether or not you look Muslim or not, but also your level of education, or your background, or your political views, there's always going to be a sense of "the other" if you don't identify (laughs) as a white Christian person in this country. So, I decided that I didn't care to ascribe to respectability politics, and I was going to present myself the way that I felt best reflected what my beliefs were. So, because I wear the headscarf, because I wear the *hijab*, whether or not I want to, I present myself as Muslim, and that's a choice I make every day to do so. So, I'm going to be known as Muslim anyway. I can't really hide that, and that's a choice I've made very consciously."

On the contrary, Madni, who is a graduate student in the Southwest, chose not to veil for safety reasons. She said,

> "I've had friends who do veil, and they have been physically assaulted, whether it ranged from like their scarves being taken off or yelling insults or some ridiculous insults, or maybe even discrimination in the workplace and student life. So, I don't veil because I feel like I do not personally have the strength to do that because I would not be able to tolerate it if someone were to physically attack me or anything."

Khadija, a first-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, agreed that her decision not to veil and was also influenced by other people's interpretations and reactions to the veil. She explained, "I tried wearing *hijab*, and I was walking through Walmart, and I do remember at one point a man walked by, and then he spat at me." She stated that her decision not to veil is not "so much about me being ashamed of my identity, but me not liking the fact that people still had this prejudice, and I don't yet know how to overcome that." The lack of safety for Muslim students on campus, and in some instances, off campus has led Muslim women to re-evaluate their decisions to wear *hijab*.

NOT LOOKING LIKE A MUSLIM — AT THE INTERSECTION OF IDENTITIES

For men and women interviewed for this study who do not wear *hijab*, they often minimize their own safety concerns because they recognize that those who wear *hijab* have a visible religious marker and therefore are more in danger. Sara, a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Northeast, noted that although she has not experienced any situations that made her feel unsafe, it may be because of how she appears. Sara noted, "I've never really experienced anything that could be particularly dangerous, but again, I also don't visibly look Muslim, so I don't think that I'd be the primary target of someone who would be trying to do anything." Mark, a second-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, admitted that it is "easier because it's not as obvious as a female, so in that sense, obviously we're [as men] sort of protected in a way from that sort of stuff." He added that he has witnessed and heard about several women in his community who have had "slurs and stuff thrown at them." Another student who does not veil, Dee, a fifth-year undergraduate student in the Midwest, explained that her decision not to veil protects her from differential treatment. She pointed out that "as a female Muslim who doesn't wear *hijab*, people typically don't know that I'm Muslim … seeing me at face value. So, I'm not usually treated very differently." Muslim women who do not veil and Muslim men recognize that their senses of safety are different than Muslim women who veil and therefore are visibly Muslim.

Many Muslim students expressed that they feel unsafe on their campus. However, some question whether or not it is because of just their Muslim identity since they carry multiple vulnerable identities. Linda, a Black Muslim undergraduate student, explained that her mom often worries about her safety at night. She explained, "Something might happen to me, not only because I'm Muslim, because I wear scarves, that you can tell that I'm Muslim, but because I'm a woman, I'm Black, so I feel like at any time I am in danger." As a Muslim woman of color, Sarah has experienced feeling unsafe as well. She explained, "I feel like I don't look as visibly Muslim. Like I don't wear a

hijab and all of that, so I haven't really experienced specific stereotypes for being Muslim, but I definitely have for being a person of color, if that makes sense." Muslim students who are also marginalized by their gender or ethnicity have the burden of carrying multiple vulnerable identities.

On the other hand, Muslim students who attend institutions with many fellow Muslim students, and other marginalized student populations reported that they feel comfortable and safe identifying as Muslim on-campus. Aziza, a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Southwest, explained that "being Muslim is like a very common thing on my campus. I would say a very large percentage of students on my campus are Muslim. So, I can't remember a single instance where I've felt that my communication with another student was impacted by being Muslim. It just feels very normal, and I don't feel like my identity characterizes me as a Muslim. I feel like I'm more characterized based off of who I am, not because I'm Muslim."

Undergraduate student Noor noted her institution's location in a major city as playing a role in her comfortability. She asserted, "Generally I have a very supportive community, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and it's just very generally open and the administration here as well, I feel, just because also it's in [a major U.S. city], which has a very strong Muslim population that is there to protect us in case of anything happening due to my religion or faith."

Hafsah echoed Noor's feelings about an open-minded, comfortable campus by saying, "The [university] community is pretty tolerant of Islam. Like I've never really had any hate speech directed towards me or any like posters or flyers, I've seen that on campus that were directed against Muslims, or not that I've seen or heard of during my stay here. So, I guess relative to where I am currently living, it hasn't really impacted me much. I mean, it's just something that's being brought up to me, and so I feel pretty comfortable." For some students, like Zainab, they are more comfortable identifying as Muslim at their institution than in their hometown because of the strong Muslim community on campus. Zainab shared, "It was really good in the sense that I've got to come here, and I saw so many other Muslims and going to school with so many other Muslims, something I'd never done before, so I think in that sense it actually made me more comfortable with my identity and more able to talk about it and be proud [of] it." Our data suggest that when Muslim students attend diverse institutions, they are more likely to feel safe and comfortable on campus.

Many Muslim students expressed that they feel unsafe on their campus. However, some question whether or not it is because of just their Muslim identity, since they carry multiple vulnerable identities.

Theme #3: Localized vs. Centralized Support

Participants often spoke of their need for support in various areas of their lives to succeed in higher education institutions. When we asked participants regarding the types of support they receive from the campus or how their school supports them, most participants identified localized but not centralized support. They received support from specific individuals on campus but did not feel that the campus or the administration collectively did much to support them. Participants often felt that they were either treated as spokespersons or were the tokenized Muslims for the institution. Institutions often used Muslim students as the spokespersons to 'learn' more about the needs of Muslim students without acknowledging the complexity of the community. Additionally, Muslim students shared that they were often tokenized and put on display to show that their campus was diverse, despite the institutional lack of support for their Muslim students.
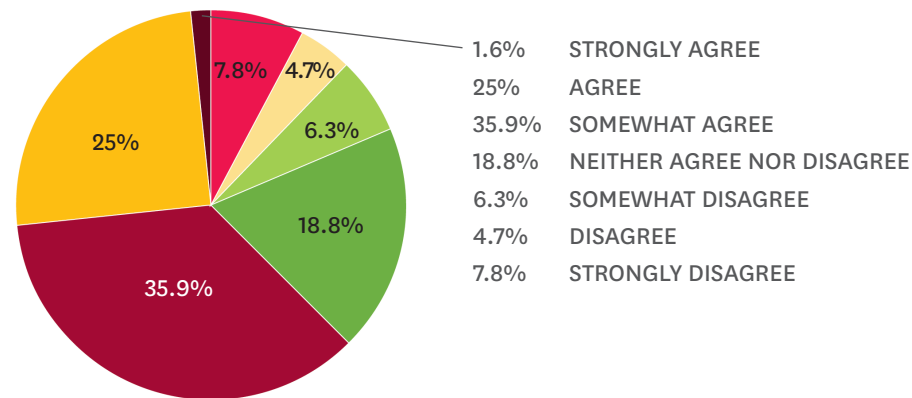
ADMINISTRATORS

When we asked students about campus support, they often pointed to specific individuals within their campus and did not see them as representative of most administrators on campus. Participants were often frustrated due to the lack of support from campus administrators and their persistent lack of understanding for the Muslim community. Noor shared:

> "I'm going to be quite frank. To me, I feel like the university is often a money-making machine, and it doesn't always consider what's best for the students, but it [the university administrators] likes to present itself as being a diverse place that encourages marginalized students to achieve their goals. And for me, I felt that, that wasn't the case and that a lot of it was for show, which is why we use the phrase neoliberal. And that frustrated me, and I found that in my own experiences, my classes, that sometimes professors or the administration didn't even know the basics surrounding what is appropriate to say or teach surrounding Muslims or perspectives that they should be having, and they don't have."

Noor expressed a sense of frustration about the lack of understanding and awareness from university administrators regarding the Muslim student community. Aside from feeling frustrated, Noor felt used. The focus on tuition dollars and only showcasing diverse populations was more important than fostering a supportive environment for students. There was more emphasis on students adding to their diversity efforts than the university doing enough to support these diverse populations.

Regarding how institutions responded to instances of Islamophobia that occurred on or off campus, students often mentioned general email responses. Nadia, a graduate student from the Southwest, added, "I feel like the administration responds really fast through email, but that's all talk but no action." Although some institutions acknowledged instances of Islamophobia, they did not do enough or, in some situations, anything at all to support their Muslim students on campus. In our survey data, about 62% of respondents (see Table 5) believed that campus administrators work toward protecting the rights of Muslim students on campus, but there were significant differences by race.

TABLE 5.
TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU BELIEVE THAT CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS WORK TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF MUSLIM AMERICANS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES?

%	Response
1.6%	STRONGLY AGREE
25%	AGREE
35.9%	SOMEWHAT AGREE
18.8%	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE
6.3%	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE
4.7%	DISAGREE
7.8%	STRONGLY DISAGREE

The post-hoc Scheffé test, conducted after the ANOVAs (Analysis of Variance; $F(3, 47) = 3.29$, $p < 0.05$)) were analyzed, revealed that Asian Muslims are more likely to agree that campus administrators *work toward protecting* Muslims ($M = 5$, $SD = 1.23$) than their Black Muslim counterparts ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.36$). The ANOVA test also indicated significant differences ($F(3, 47) = 2.91$, $p < 0.05$) across racial/ethnic groups' perceptions regarding campus administrators *support* for Muslims on campus. In that, Black Muslim students ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.4$) are less likely than their Asian Muslim peers to agree that campus administrators *support* Muslim ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 0.45$).

FACULTY AND ADVISORS

Although one-third of students expressed that they neither agreed nor disagreed that administrators support Muslim students, they often had a mentor or faculty advisor with whom they could rely on. Deniz talked about her academic advisor and shared,

> "I went to Turkey and Turkey is not really in the best political state right now. So, he was really concerned about me and he was like, I mean, do you have to go there? I mean, don't go there, you may not be able to come back and stuff. So, he was really caring. He would send me emails over the summer, and he's not even a Muslim, he's just normal American."

Sitara also shared that her advisor "has always been very interested in knowing about my – faith and like because it makes up such a big part of my extracurricular activity. So, because of that, she's very aware and knows about these things, or is very interested in learning about it." In these cases, students felt like their advisors were supportive of their academics and their religious identity, despite not identifying as Muslim.

Whenever students needed religious accommodations for holidays or prayers, many campuses were said to be supportive as long as the students expressed their needs. Noor elaborated:

> "So the university has to abide by Title IX clauses obviously, and because it is a public institution, it has non-discrimination clauses... you can ask for religious holiday or let your professors know that you're going to be off or that you, for example, might be fasting, saying you need religious accommodation, or anything related to your worship. They've been good – If you push them enough, they've been good about

creating spaces for students to pray on campus or like designated student places in the library or in a designated reflection or prayer meditation room. But they've been good about that because they're typically easy fixes. They're not difficult. But when it comes to policies surrounding religious accommodation, they might feel that they're all for it, but again, the onus is on students to make that actually happen. And they aren't actively at the forefront trying to push for these types of policies."

In this instance, this student expressed that her campus offered accommodations to remain compliant with federal laws. However, students had to "push" for these changes or accommodations because they were reactive, not proactive accommodations for Muslim students. Participants in the survey data indicated that almost half, about 43% of the participants, think that faculty are at least somewhat supportive (see Table 6).

According to the survey data, most students have not had negative experiences with faculty due to their Muslim identity (i.e. being discouraged or singled out in class).
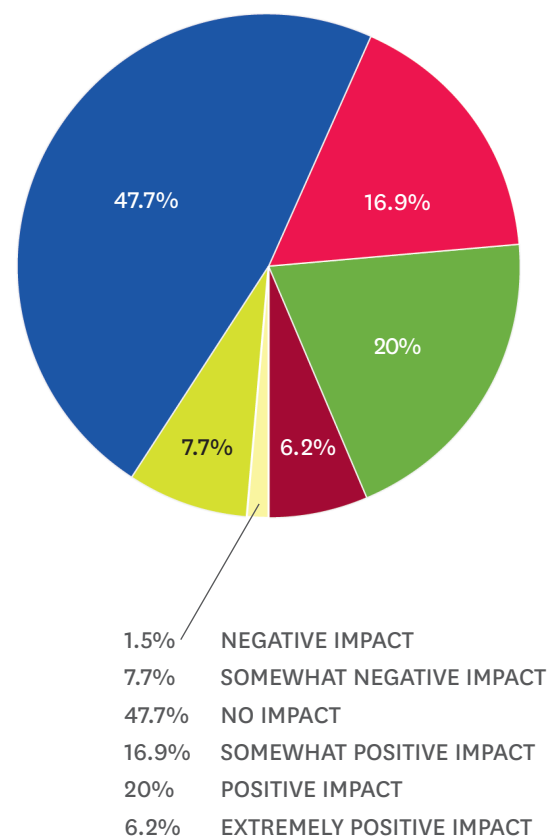
SPOKESPERSON AND TOKENISM

Participants often spoke of experiences in which they had to act as representatives for the whole Muslim community. Students often served as spokespersons where they were asked to speak on behalf of the Muslim community, teach others about Islam, or defend their religion from misconceptions and stereotypes. At times, Muslim students were tokenized and were asked to participate in diversity campaigns and show others that there were Muslims on campus. They were showcased to external constituents as examples of a diverse student body but did not necessarily receive the support they needed to thrive on campus. In both instances, participants shared that the Muslim community is diverse, that they could not possibly represent every perspective, and that it was a large responsibility that campuses placed on them.

Whenever students were asked to speak on behalf of the Muslim community, they often felt that they had to defend Islam and the rhetoric that is spread through media and under the current political administration. Linda, a second-year undergraduate student from the Southwest, said, "Sometimes I feel like I don't want to explain myself a lot because whenever you say something, people don't understand, and they take it badly, and then you have to explain more, and especially in the Trump climate, people do have a lot of fear." Mariam, a fourth-year undergraduate student from the Southwest, asserted, "Your whole life you kind of feel like you are representing Islam to a lot of people who have never ever been subjected to it." She then added:

"I think there's a lot of things that, like, as a Muslim-American you have to feel – have to be careful about how I'm representing Islam because I don't want to wrongly represent it, and it's I don't

TABLE 6.
HAS YOUR MUSLIM IDENTITY IMPACTED YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTY?

1.5%	NEGATIVE IMPACT
7.7%	SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE IMPACT
47.7%	NO IMPACT
16.9%	SOMEWHAT POSITIVE IMPACT
20%	POSITIVE IMPACT
6.2%	EXTREMELY POSITIVE IMPACT

want to be so like strict and conservative that people think like, oh, this religion is really intense, and I also don't want to be completely opposite, like off the other end when people are like, oh, I don't even know what's the difference between Islam and anything else, so I'd definitely say, like, the sort of pressure to kind of be a positive person in the community and show that we're also involved in, you know, normal people."

Students felt pressure to represent their religious communities correctly or positively, yet the political climate made it difficult and, in some instances, caused fear.

Multiple participants expressed that their campuses advertised diversity, but then they realized that they became the token Muslim student in various organizations on campus. Some students expressed that they would not consider their campuses to be diverse or that they had diversity issues. Noor added:

"I wouldn't be surprised if I was chosen not only for my qualifications but also because I fit some kind of diversity quota, even if there isn't actually a quota, but just that I look diverse. And so, on campus, that's often a thing that happens is that I … chosen to speak because I look diverse, and I'm able to present myself as such. But that doesn't always go very well when I don't fit the – the kind of viewpoints that they would like me to have or see the, quote-unquote, Muslim woman."

Noor shared that she felt that she was chosen partially because her identity served an alternative purpose for the school and not necessarily because of the qualifications and academic rigor she brought to her program. Bringing in a diverse student body would make the school *look* better.

When students were on campus, they felt that they were often singled out and asked to represent the Muslim community and help showcase that their campus was admitting and supporting a diverse student body. Amal, a graduate student from the Northeast, asserted:

"Sometimes at [my school] you do feel a little bit tokenized, like there's been a couple of times when, you know, like the dean's office wants me to be in a video, or people want to take photos, and I think that those are the times where I push back a little bit, because I wonder if it's just because I'm in a headscarf, I'm visibly, you know, diverse or whatever."

Muslim students were asked to portray a sense of diversity for promotional materials even when the campus did not reflect the pamphlets. Some participants wondered if participating in these campaigns helped attract a more diverse student population or if they were being used and creating a false perspective of the campus for outsiders.

Muslim college students feel that campuses are doing the bare minimum to support them while in college, but that there are a few and very specific individuals who have shown that they care about our participants' wellbeing. Although students feel their campuses do not do enough to support them, they do report feeling that they are the designated Muslim spokesperson in various spaces, or they are tokenized and asked to portray the diversity of campus. In doing so, students feel that they are on campus to fulfill the purposes of making the school's diversity numbers *look* better, without receiving the care or support that they thought they would receive when they first applied. Students often turn to individuals such as advisors and professors for support and are even surprised when they receive it. Institutions are doing a disservice to current and prospective Muslim students by portraying a diverse and supportive campus when, in reality, many campuses are doing the bare minimum to offer support for Muslim students.

Because Muslim students are often otherized and the core of their various social identities are not fully accepted, they are forced to look at themselves and their experiences through the eyes of the dominant student body on college campuses — in essence living between two worlds.

Discussion

Muslim students face difficulties on college campuses on a daily basis. This study revealed three themes: 1) Between Two Worlds, 2) Safety, and 3) Localized vs. Centralized Support, that illustrate the challenges that Muslim college students experience. Because Muslim students are often otherized and the core of their various social identities are not fully accepted, they are forced to look at themselves and their experiences through the eyes of the dominant student body on college campuses – in essence living between two worlds (Ahmadi, 2011). On one hand, they are living and existing under the white Christian gaze of the dominant student body; on the other hand, they may not be accepted within their own Muslim community. An example of this is when Muslim student organizations do not respect and accept students from various Muslim sects such as *Shia* and/or *Sunni* sect. Given the diversity of the Muslim community, many Muslim college students do not fit into one specific racial, ethnic, or national origin demographic. Thus, how Muslim students self-identify is vastly different than how they are identified and viewed by others.

This otherized perception leads to safety concerns that many Muslim students face. Both domestic and international Islamophobia negatively impacts Muslim college students' safety, sense of belonging on a campus (Cole, Newman, & Hypolite, 2019; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012), and mattering to their peers, staff, faculty, and administration (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). This sense of not belonging and not mattering puts an enormous amount of pressure and emotional distress on Muslim college students to change their appearance and change the way they conduct themselves in order to avoid verbal and physical assaults. However, increased diversity based on the racial and ethnic makeup of the campus helps Muslim students' sense of safety, belonging, and mattering. In fact, increasing the number of knowledgeable faculty, staff, and administrators can assist with Muslim students feeling safe, that they belong to the institution, and that they matter.

Similar to other college students, Muslim students need a supportive environment to thrive in and succeed in college. This study demonstrates how a caring, knowledgeable faculty, staff, or administrator can make a difference in a student's life; yet, it also revealed that institutions as a whole do not have a centralized mechanism to assist and support Muslim college students. While it is essential to acknowledge incidents of Islamophobia via email to the campus community, it is equally as important to follow through and take corrective measure to decrease discrimination and hate

directed at Muslim college students (Ahmadi, Sanchez, & Cole, 2019). Moreover, designating Muslim college students to serve as the spokesperson for the whole Muslim community shifts the burden from the institution to the students who are already marginalized. Passive participation or being the token person selected to serve only on Islam/Muslim related issues is not much more than representation without power. Portraying religious diversity, while not fully supporting Muslim college students on campus is problematic, disingenuous, and is a disservice to the whole student body. We should expect more for our Muslim students and the overall campus milieu of which they are a part.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations to assist and support Muslim college students and their sense of safety, belonging, and mattering on college campuses.

1) Invest and create a centralized mechanism to identify discrimination and hate directed at Muslim college students, investigate incidents of hate and discrimination, and follow through with actionable steps to address and resolve the issue.
   - Be sure to consider the extent to which Muslim college students' religious identity intersect with other targeted social identities, such that students who have multiple targeted identities are accurately supported – at the intersection of their identities.
2) Pair supportive faculty and administrators with Muslim students to work together. Go beyond just compliance and institute policies that are supportive and protective of Muslim college students' constitutionally protected rights to practice their religion and congregate as a religious group.
   - Be sure to revisit policies annually, as socio-political and geo-religious events in the U.S. and around the world can have a significant impact on the relevance of institutional policies.
3) Educate and train faculty and administrators about Islam and Muslims through professional development, seminars, university colloquia, and invite experts to speak about the diversity within Islam and among Muslims.
4) Carefully consider how professional development opportunities can inform and improve curricular choices and pedagogical practices regarding Muslim students.
5) Create safe spaces for Muslim students to gather, pray, and engage in community development.
6) Encourage and cultivate student organizations so that there are several options across the intersection of Muslim student identities. When students can find an engaging and meaningful peer-to-peer experience, students are more likely to feel safe, have an opportunity to share their full authentic selves, and have transformative college experiences.
   - Cultivating such intra-group diversity among student organizations should be accompanied with structured opportunities for these student groups to co-sponsor activities, events, programs, and workshops.

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Center for Education, Identity and Social Justice at the USC Rossier School of Education was launched on Feb. 1, 2017 by Professor Shafiqa Ahmadi and Professor Darnell Cole who serve as co-directors. Our Center has a compelling interest in eradicating all forms of discrimination based on the intersection of an individual's identities that include religion, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and disability. Using rigorous research and legal analysis, we empower educators to utilize laws and policies in order to identify and extricate bias and unequal distributions of power within educational institutions.

TEAM MEMBERS *pictured from left to right: Maritza Salazar, Yutong Liu (Emma), Shafiqa Ahmadi, Darnell Cole, Alex Atashi, Mabel Sanchez*

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