Inclusive and catholic: Challenging the myth with reality

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INCLUSIVE AND CATHOLIC: CHALLENGING THE MYTH WITH REALITY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the multifaceted issue of cultural and religious challenges for an international Muslim group at a Catholic research institution. Measures employed by university community to assert the friendliness of campus to students from other religions and student perceptions of the effectiveness of these measures are surveyed to reveal the inclusion of students from several religious affiliations, especially Muslim students. The study was based on several data collection methods including, surveys, content analysis of religious prayers performed at university functions, and in depth interviews with Muslim students. However, this report is mainly focused on the interview findings. Data analysis revealed constructs that are pivotal to the case including, consistency in affirming the catholic identity of the university, intentionally avoiding the usage of solely Christian terminology, awareness of the culture of students from several religious affiliations, capitalizing on aspects of other religions that is connected to the Christian faith, and consciously spreading an atmosphere of appreciation for the other.

INTRODUCTION

In the post 9/11 era, it was like a dream to see Middle Eastern students marching into American campuses let alone Muslim students from Saudi Arabia enrolling at American Catholic institutions (Open Doors, 2011). Unprepared for such dreams to come true, college administrators had to improvise to come up with innovative techniques and strategies to accommodate and extend helping hands to these students. Therefore, building on aspects of inclusiveness and foundations of the Catholic tradition, this qualitative study explored the issue of cultural and religious challenges for an international Muslim group at a Catholic research institution. The study endeavored to explore measures employed by university community to assert campus friendliness to students from other religions and student perceptions of the effectiveness of these measures. The main goal was to make these available for administrators and faculty who aspire to increase the inclusivity of their campuses while maintaining their institution’s religious identity.

GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The study explores the case of Saudi Muslim students at Parish University (PU), a Mid-Western catholic research university. Cultural, religious and transitional circumstances that surround the presence of Saudi students on a Catholic institution are examined to reveal factors that might be influencing students’ perceptions of the fit between them and the institutional culture. Measures of the institutional community to welcome, orient, and retain Muslim students are also examined to serve as a model of inclusive practice for student affairs administrators at catholic institutions. The view of several stakeholders including: faculty, administrators, student affairs professionals, and the Muslim students themselves would help to evaluate the efficiency of these measures and their adequacy given the complexity of the issue. Utilizing several data collection tools, the study endeavors to find answers for the following questions:
(1) How do students feel about their studies at a Catholic institution that is highly assertive about its mission and identity like the University of Dayton campus?

(2) What are some mechanisms of inclusiveness practiced by professional and faculty members to increase campus friendliness and inclusivity?

(3) How are the aforementioned mechanisms perceived by the Muslim students on campus?

**CATHOLIC INCLUSIVITY**

Although the name, catholic institutions, would sound as targeting a certain category of students, American higher education started as mainly rooted in the Christian faith. Later, those very institutions opened their doors to students from different denominations (Thelin & Gasman, 2010). While creating a heated discussion among scholars and practitioners, such inclusivity had two different stages. The local stage included the inclusion of students from Christian denominations other than Catholic. The global stage of inclusion targeted admitting students from faiths other than Christianity.

**To Christian Students**

In terms of involving students based of different Christian ideologies, there are many circulating views (Dosen, 2009, Topping, 2010; Walbank, 2012). The first is that Catholic institutions should remain exclusively Catholic. Topping (2010, p. 54) admits Catholic supporters of the Great Books approach have been known to find themselves in isolation. In a British study, Catholic school principals reported difficulty in grasping Catholic religious affiliated educational schemes supporting Catholic charities and pronouncing a Catholic vision whilst admitting and nurturing those who are not Catholic (Walbank, 2012, p. 179). Next, there are those who argue for the lack of Christian practices among faith based organizations such as Catholic Universities. This argument claims that contemporary Catholic institutions as a whole do not provide enough overarching moral framework that is necessary to create a “Christian” atmosphere in the conduct of students on campus (Dosen, 2009, p. 366).

Inclusively focused approaches suggest there should not be an issue of segregation between Catholic and non-Catholic students. Indeed, a nun was quoted by Scanlan (2012, p. 107) as refusing to work for any Catholic school that was not inclusive. In support of the nun’s stance, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue defines the teaching of the Catholic Church as such, “Christians who lack appreciation and respect for other believers and their religious traditions are ill-prepared to proclaim the Gospel to them,” as cited in (Walbank, 2012, p. 179). Likewise, Heft (2009) addresses the principles of all views maintaining, “Catholic colleges and universities are not just generically Christian, but explicitly Catholic with all that includes…There is a need to find ways to rediscover the truth that [our] universities [are] inclusive communities and [Christians and Catholics alike] embrace diversity, because we affirm that God creates everyone in the divine image” (p. 381-382).

**To Students from Other Religions**

However, the case stayed confined in the Christian faith until calls for inclusivity of students from other faiths began to spread early in the 20th century (Garrett, 2006). Hinsdale argued that the Catholic disciplinary tone is a monochromatic form of Anglo-American Catholicism (as cited in Dosen, 2009). Despite these anti-inclusive views, movements have been gradually emerging due to multicultural growth of students at Catholic institutions, as cited in (Dosen, 2009, p. 365). For instance, the evolvement of Catholic higher education pursuit of heightened global society between the 1960s and 1990s incorporated Islamic...
studies into their framework (Dosen, 2009, p. 364). Moreover, as similar student demands increase for a more relevant curriculum, faculty will in turn begin offering courses that address the literature, history, and worldview of those ethnic groups not traditionally represented (Dosen, 2009, p. 363-364). Rodden (2012) emphasizes contemporary views on the acceptance of Catholic inclusion declaring what is most crucial is openness to Catholic practice while also exploring the Catholic faith and acknowledging its limitations (p.27). Rodden (2012) describes this “interfaith enterprise” to extend to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and even atheism (p. 27). Therefore, Catholic universities have and will continue to transform their perspective of studying various ethnicities, religions, and art to one that will enable people to better understand modern America (Dosen, 2009, p. 363-364).

Controversy of Inclusivity while Catholic

In the twentieth century, the debate surrounding Catholic institutions was their academic quality (Heft, 2009). According to secular academic standards and accrediting agencies, Heft (2009) argues, present day Catholic colleges offer better education than ever before. Thus, today’s issues have shifted to the quality of “catholicity” within Catholic Education. Therefore, a heated discussion goes on as pertaining to the need for inclusion as opposed to asserting the identity of the institution with its catholic character (Morey & Piderit, 2006). There are many protestors to secular movements in alliance to what this terminology accurately represents. Topping (2010) argues that as a result of reforms in the 1960s, Catholic Institutions’ undergraduate curriculum gravitated to Black history, Gender awareness, African-Americans, Latinos, Native American, and even Judaic Studies in turn losing all “epistemic confidence” that originally supported core curricula (p. 54-55). Hendershott (2011) similarly criticizes the authenticity of present Catholic institutions stating that Catholic identity is only proclaimed when politically convenient, possible benefits for recruitment are present or when raising funds from Catholic donors (p. 378). According to (Hendershott, 2011), many of these same schools deny that identity when state or federal funding is available, and secularization makes them more attractive recipients (2011, p. 378).

Other scholars believe that Catholic institutions, in order to keep up with increasingly secular and inclusive societal trends, must make advancements in doing the same while also avoiding the stigma of being an inherently exclusive system. O’Brien’s point out there is, “A right to sectarian exclusivity on the one hand and theologies of love and compassion that require inclusivity on the other. This leads such institutions to invite engagement and participation by marginalized groups, while at the same time maintaining an institutional prerogative to discriminate against them in the name of Catholic identity,” (as cited in Gauthier, 2012, p. 1). However, Heft (2009) explains the mission of Catholic institutions should not be restricted to a religious and moral formation, but also an intellectual one; emphasizing that Catholicism’s history ranges anywhere from theology, philosophy, social teaching, political thought and music to aesthetics (p. 376). Rodden (2012) adds the necessary dynamics of an inclusive system are the adherence of Catholic schools to the finest of its spiritual-intellectual tradition as well as its openness and receptivity to the world to shape a more progressive environment (p. 22).

In addition, debates circulate around the development of Catholic Studies Programs (CSP), and the extent to which the Vatican should be involved. Originally designed to gain a clearer focus on Catholicism in both the curriculum and student life, CSP courses are meant to reorient the Catholic tradition as well as rescue religion from the societal tendency to think of it primarily in emotional and moral terms (Heft, 2009, pp. 369 & 376). From the scholarly standpoint, encouragement and acceptance of diversity through CSPs are heightened (Heft, 2009, p. 371). Yet, apprehensions among Catholic thinkers remain. Heft (2009) asserts, “CSPs marginalize Catholic content, sequestering them in a small area of the curriculum, or
reducing them to [optional] curriculum, such as environmental studies” (p. 369). The progression of these “inclusive” fears may lead to the emergence of the Vatican calling for the necessity of the “canonical requirements” and specification of Catholic Higher Education faculty and staff (Heft, 2009, p. 369). Steinfelds counteracts the involvement of the pope by calling the Catholic education leaders to “take into consideration the actual realities of Catholic higher education in the United States rather than get a good report card from Rome,” (as cited in Heft, 2009, p. 371). In relation to the Pope’s involvement on CSP debates and overall anti inclusivity issues, Dillon highlights the stronger desire for the Church to change and relate more positively to the modern world as opposed to Church authority in making moral decisions (as cited in Starks, 2009, p. 4).

Challenges for Muslim Students

Challenges for Muslim Saudi students varied in types and severity. However, they fell under two main categories (Razek, 2015). First are the challenges that face Muslim Saudi students as any other international students on American campuses. Second are the challenges created by being in a religiously affiliated institution while coming from a very orthodox Islamic culture.

As International Students

Similar to other international students at American universities, Saudi international students face several challenges under various categories. Cultural challenges usually include being from a collectivist culture that stresses the value of the group raising it to a level higher than that of the individual. Another cultural challenge is the difference in behavioral norms between the culture of origin and the host culture (Long, 2005). Patterns of social interactions constitute a third dimension of the cultural challenge. These social patterns are usually related to hierarchical level, gender, and age (Razek & Coyner, 2013). The culture of origin in that case regulates what is deemed proper and what is not. Such norms are usually challenged with concepts like freedom of speech that is exercised in the classroom with students sometimes asked to challenge the teachings of the professors (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). Another common aspect of unconformity is the extremely open gender relationships when compared to the reserved, or rather restricted, relationships in the countries of origin. Almost standing as a separate category are the stereotypes usually promoted by the media about both Saudi students and culture on one side and the Judo-Christian values and practices on the other side (Razek & Awad, 2012).

Linguistic challenges constitute a separate category as influencing several dimensions of the Saudi international student on campus. An often reported lack of language proficiency jeopardizes the student ability to negotiate roles in the learning processes with peers and with instructors. Limited linguistic capabilities limit the student chances in seeking help both from advisors or in utilization of campus support services. Low language proficiency makes cultural integration harder when students shy from engaging on campus activities and events because they are intimidated by their limited communication skills (Gloria & Ho, 2003). Such a barrier adds to the alienation of Muslim international students on American campuses.

Educational parity is another category of the challenges facing Muslim international students on U.S. colleges. Muslim international students usually come from countries with high school grade inflation (Razek & Awad, 2011). Moreover, international students are not required to take the SAT or the ACT standardized tests. Therefore, the educational content they have is not verified. Another aspect of the educational parity is the learning habits (Razek & Coyner, 2013). Educated in a system that value memorizations, tests, and theories, Saudi international students are faced with a detrimental difficulty to adapt to a more open system of educational practice that value inquiry, application, and problem solving.
At Religious Affiliated Institutions

Let alone being international students with all the challenges discussed above, Saudi students at PU experience a different situation where their most Islamic conservative values are challenged by a strong catholic institutional identity (Razek & Coyner, 2014; Shafer, 2012). The general assumption for a Muslim attending a catholic institution with a high religious identity is to feel that much of the practice does not connect to one’s values and beliefs (Estanek, James, & Norton, 2006). Some example out of many include: the presence of Christian symbols of all over campus; crosses in the classrooms; payers at the beginning of some classes; starting and ending campus events with a service performed by a rector or a priest; mass bells; and celebrations of Christian holidays (Razek & Coyner, 2013; Shafer, 2012). However, the numbers of Muslim students are still increasing phenomenally on American catholic campuses.

METHODS

Building upon the relationship between the student cultural beliefs and the fit between their entry characteristics and their institution (Razek & Coyner, 2013; Tinto, 1993), this study aimed at examining the integration aspects of the increased presence of Saudi students enrolled in the various academic programs at PU, a Catholic private university. Approved by the Institutional Review Board, the study was developed based upon an initial study that utilized survey data and content analysis. After conducting initial site observations of religious activities and document reviews of admission criteria and recruitment material, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 21 participants. The selection of participation was conducted utilizing Patton (2003) snowball technique where participants nominated each other as prospective participants. However, a maximum variation strategy was utilized to include different characteristics of gender, marital status, major, college level, religious conservativeness, and beginning or end of the educational experiences (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were transcribed and coded under a preliminary list of codes. The codes were analyzed under several emergent themes that include: first Encounter, religious identity challenges, and campus practices. Interview transcripts and analytical themes were verified by participants for completeness and validation.

FINDINGS

Study findings revealed various constructs influencing the continuous increase of Saudi students at PU. Some of these constructs included innovative strategies to orient, educate, and acculturate incoming Saudi students to campus life and the academic expectations. These included strengthening the social support elements, increasing comfort in the college environment, building social relationships, providing peer support, and raising students’ self-confidence. Others aimed at raising the awareness of the campus community of the case of Saudi students. Other findings revealed the inclusiveness of the current educational practice at PU as a model for Catholic institution. Moreover, findings revealed a culture of acceptance and tolerance among the Saudi Muslim students.

Challenges

The challenges faced by Saudi students usually include the normal ones faced by other international students. For example, settling in which constitutes a phase where every international has to navigate while at the same time handling academic tasks and responsibilities. Another challenge is usually the linguistic abilities of the international students which limit the students understanding inside and outside of the classroom (Chong & Razek, 2014). The academic content usually represents another challenge when most of the
international students are not sufficiently prepared for the amount of reading or the depth of content that they are faced with once in the United States. Another aspect is homesickness usually influencing international students during their first periods away from their home country. However, given the certain characteristics of the Muslim students in the study, the challenges were actually different. First is the assimilation in the new culture and absorption of the norms of the Christian faith practiced at PU. Students varied in their degree of assimilations based on the strength of their religious beliefs, degree of openness to other religions, and previous experiences with religiously affiliated institutions. Students perceptions of symbols, images and icons of the Christianity frequently seen on campus public places from the classroom and the library to building entrances and on top of light posts. Another challenge for these students was the image of their own identity. Identity by definition is the reflections of one’s personality integrating all the backgrounds and experiences one has gone through. However, the student participants in this study have been a very little time to develop such identity especially in the middle of a harsh transition from a centralized closed segregated society to an open, decentralized, and coeducational environment. Such transition did not allow them to develop identity images for themselves and consequently did not develop an image of their perception of Christianity. Some of the participants reported identity instability when looking at their perceptions of Islam as their own religion when they see it in light of another religious practice. However, these students were positive about the newly committed identity as a supportive mechanism in their new unfamiliar territory where they reconsider their beliefs, habits, and perspectives.

**First Encounter**

Participants reported that in their home country, Islam does not have that many pictures and statues, and so many symbols drawn on walls like what PU had as a catholic institution. Therefore, their first encounter with campus shocked them with all the symbols of Christianity all around. However, such a shock enabled them to reflect on the ideas of religion. Actually, some of them got deeper into the perception and looking at Jesus and Mary as figures in Islam and how Islam holds a high stature for Jesus Christ according to the Quran, “God said: O Jesus! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me, and am cleansing thee of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow thee above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection” (3:55). Such high stature of Jesus and the Virgin Mary gave the participants a sense of comfort.

The daily interaction of the students meant a lot to them. One participant reflected on the differences between them as a group and other students saying, “I'm different just like the Ugly Duckling. Everybody looks the same, we look different in the dress and hairstyle and even in the food we eat”. Such an alienating feeling may give the students a feeling of unrest or discomfort. However, participants shared that their American classmates had a hazy image about them as Muslims and about Islam as a religion and even what cultures are prevalent in their countries. However, they were concerned that they tried to correct this image but in vain because “no one has time to delve deeper into somebody else's culture or somebody’s belief system to understand it. Some of the participants shared that often times, they encounter someone who is eager to listen. Salma shared, “One of my American friends asked me about my religion and I felt great. Wow!! That's like a lighthouse in the dark sea”. The imagery that Salma is using reflects the perceived feeling of frustration and how one person asking about her religion meant a lot to her. Participants reported that they are always happy to share information about their beliefs. However, they wondered why this rarely happens. Ragheb reflects “I figured out that Americans feel that religion is something private. Something that you don't really ask people about and so out of politeness they do not ask".
Participant reported that several times they felt there are certain campus personnel who were like bridge builders for them. Jasi shares, “You feel that you know those persons from before. in these programs you feel someone is stretching a hand out to you to help you cross that bridge over the canyon of weirdness”. Therefore, these helping hands helped the participants at times to move away from the alienation complex that was surrounding them.

Consequently, the students were able to appreciate the value of their experience at PU. Gradually, they felt the importance of widening the horizons of their perspectives to embrace their interactions with others on a Catholic campus. Therefore, the variety of lived moments and encounters they had was mostly important in their growth as developing college students. Such growth made them more of understanding of the various beliefs that exist in the world and more appreciative of the values of diversity in general.

Student perceptions varied about their experiences at PU as a Catholic institution. Some participants expressed their comfort in being at a place where faith is an aspect to share with other people. They took pride in expressing his beliefs. Other students shared that Catholic schools always meant better schooling for them. That experience with Catholic education comes from the idea that Catholic private schools in the Middle East are known for high quality education.

Some participants expressed their happiness with the dress code at PU especially those who transferred from public institutions. Shaheea shared that at her previous urban public institution young women would wear inappropriate clothes to the degree that I felt shame for them. When I transferred here I felt more comfortable with what the women around me would wear. They don't dress the same garment like me and they do not have head covers but there's still a lot more covered than previous university. But it is enough for me to dress like the Virgin Mary and to see them appreciating my commitment rather than looking down at me for my choice of cloth.

Most of the participants expressed the content by being around other people of faith. Osman shared, “We all have a higher entity that we look at for protection and love. It doesn’t have to be the same book. The same language but God is the same as we all pray to the same God the God of Abraham.”

Inclusive Practice

The PU reaction to the presence of the Saudi students on campus was unprecedented and unexpected by the participants. They reported three levels of organized and dedicated help that supported their educational mission at PU. These three levels were: the prayer room, teaching in the university classroom, and the international programs.

Prayer Room

The students did not expect the flexibility that PU administration handled their requests for a prayer space. Eiad exclaims, "When we asked for a prayer space, we expected that the school will be furious reacting to such an insolent demand. We did not expect them to give us a room that easy". Amer compares his previous experience in the institution he completed his English training. He says, "There, we had to go and talk to the dean of students and the director of the Hub to convince them that we need a place to pray every week. When they were finally convinced, we had to go through a process of booking the room". He continues to express the instability of room allocation, "The room was not guaranteed, though. We were canceled out of it if there is another event going on in the Hub". Then, he moves to PU,

Here, we were asking for a place to pray the Friday prayer. They gave us a room. It was small, but continuous. Later, they moved us to a small building that has beautiful
classroom for our use. Now, we have carpets, shoe racks, bookshelves, and a podium with a laptop. We have also a separate space for the sisters.

The utilization of the room is no longer confined to the Friday prayer. It is dedicated for the use of Muslim students all day. Campus Ministry at PU acts as the umbrella unit for all religious organizations on campus. It also allowed the Muslim Student Association to hold their organized events both on campus and off campus as well. When official were asked about the phenomenon, they responded that the original mission of PU was to "nourish the faith" and it left "the faith" general and not specific for an inclusion purpose.

Prayers on Events

Current practices at PU included the recitation of prayers during several functions of the university ranging from small unit meetings to larger university convocation and graduation commencement. An analysis of these prayers revealed an intentional practice of inclusion avoiding areas of conflicts or disagreement among the three heavenly religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, the degree of conformity varied according to three main factors: the audience, the speaker, and the purpose of the gathering. It was also highlighted by participants that figures representing the Campus Ministry were always more sensitive in their choice of words when it comes to public prayers. Wahida tells an incident when she was attending an event at the Hub and the speaker delivered a prayer that was not inclusive of her beliefs. However, she felt it is expected to hear such prayers on a Catholic campus. After the event, she was surprised by a faculty member tapping on her shoulder. The professor apologized for the exclusive prayers saying, "When we admitted you, we knew that you are not Catholic. So, we should be sensitive when we include our students in our events". Wahida reflects on the incident saying, "I felt great. I really appreciated this small gesture of friendliness. I told the professor that when I chose PU, I knew it was a Catholic institution. But look how beautifully she responded to me".

Teaching

Instructor interaction with Saudi students as coming from a different religion varied through different circumstances. Participants across the board felt that instructors were very unrealistic in their expectations of their learning outcomes as they treated them as equal to domestic students. However, this did not urge the participants to deny that the instructors were very cognizant of their religious background. In some incidents, instructors invited students to present to classes about their religion and country. This depended on the type of the course and the context of the relationship. Other instructors allowed some flexibility during giving feedback on assignment or during advising sessions. Wael reflects on his religion studies instructor's initiative to make changes to the syllabus must be ause he had four Saudi Muslim students in the class. He shares, "

Dr. T. was very surprised when he saw the four of us in the class. Actually it was Rana who attracted his attention with her headscarf and veil. He began asking questions about our religion. Then, one day, he asked us if we would be willing to present about Islam during a section of the class. We said we would love to. He then sent an email to the whole class thanking us for accepting to share our idea of Islam with the class. We felt very proud because later, he said that we changed the way he is going to teach this class afterwards.

During advising sessions, faculty advisers were very considerate of the individual conditions of the Muslim students. It appeared mostly in two cases: timing of classes to schedule and the female Saudi students. Eiad recollects his first advising meeting,

I was very afraid as it was my first meeting with my professor. I had thoughts about avoiding classes at the time of the Friday prayer. But I was not going to ask my professor to change the time for the class. To my surprise, she asked 'You are a Muslim? Right?' I nodded
'Yes'... She said, 'Then, no classes on Friday afternoon'. It was a comfort from heaven that cooled my heart... I haven't missed one Friday prayer since I was a kid.

Teaching classes for Saudi women is sometimes challenging as the instructors have to deal with several conflicting questions: whether the student is comfortable in a group setting, if the student is able to meet with group members outside of the classroom, if the student drives or she needs a ride from a husband or a brother, and how comfortable the student is with class oral presentation. Professors at PU appeared to be doing a very efficient job in accommodating female Saudi students as Israa reflects,

My professor was very considerate of my religion... As a Muslim woman I have my standards of relationships with my classmates... He was even more cautious in putting me in groups with male students... In one night, we had an event that was extended till 9:30. He made sure one of the women in class asks me if I would need a ride home or not... He knew I do not drive.

Likewise, Hend shares her experience in a physics class where the professor had an understanding of her culture and religion and showed a proactive strategy not to offend her by classmates’ possible low rating. She says,

I was taking the physics class. We were only two girls the class, one American student and myself. The teacher had a scoring guide for our presentations. He also had us grade each other. One of the items was eye contact. He actually asked my classmates to ignore this item when they grade my presentation as he knew I would not look at the guys in the eye.... It is not appropriate ... in my religion to look people in the eye.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Implications of the study included suggestions for campus administrators to ease the integration of these students into college academic and social life, increase their retention rates, optimize their learning outcomes, and empower them with a rich college experience. PU support systems are organized to demonstrate a replicable model that can be adopted to ease the cultural adjustment of these students at other Catholic campuses. PU’s support model included three prongs: 1) cultural sensitive practice, 2) teaching focused on individualized learning experiences, and 3) inclusive purposeful campus programming.

The cultural sensitive practice includes looking at the Muslim student experience as an essential part of the acculturation process which increases the chances of success. A basic value that Catholic educators need to recognize is the appreciation these students have for basic Catholic values (Schmidtke, 2011). A general understanding of these students’ different backgrounds calls for clearly intentional planning for almost every learning experience especially the extracurricular ones as they help in guiding integrating students into the campus community (Razek & Coyner, 2013). Administration may consider offering religious support through providing a prayer room for these students as they need to feel safe while practicing their faith (James & Estanek, 2012). Such initiative provides an added value to the retention process of these students as they need to utilize a spiritual space of their own. This helps the students feel comfortable and feel at home and with no pressure noticed against their faith (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Although not prohibited on campus, alcohol consumption should be minimized in official university programs not only for the sake of these students but also to give a message of a healthier campus community (Shafer, 2012). This policy would encourage Muslim students to attend social events on campus and participating in several engagement activities as they feel more comfortable with less drinking (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Moreover, the food menu of the university dining services may move towards providing a more kosher friendly menu.
Teaching should be focused on creating an individualized learning experience for each student (Razek, 2014). Professors and instructors will need the support of all stakeholders as they exert noticeable effort in differentiating instruction for all students including Saudi students. Instructors will need to appreciate that these students have a different background than most of other students in their classrooms. Therefore, they gear their instruction towards meeting the students where they are. Although such efforts may be challenging as they call for extra planning, they provide the help the students need along the road towards their success (Keup, 2006). Several instances of sensitive individualized teaching may be integrated in the curriculum such as completing a module about Islamic culture and religion in the entry-level theology classes (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). History, humanities, and theology instructors should focus more on the similarities among religions rather than the differences (Boehme, 2008; Freidenreich, 2010). Moreover, highlighting the moral underpinning behind all religions and beliefs opens the minds of students to the common ground among the different (Sammak, 2009).

Programming is the third component of the PU model to help the students achieve their educational goals. At the forefront of positive programs are the non-alcohol related events coinciding with party time on campus. Though not directly targeting Muslim students, these provide safe environment for the students to participate and engage in positive social gatherings as well. Campus programming may also sponsor and publicize special events surrounding Muslim holidays (Razek & Coyner, 2013). These events contribute positively to the identity of the students on campus so they feel acknowledged as an integral part of the campus community (Kuh, 2007). General campus wide awareness events about religious diversity may raise awareness of all students about the value of the diverse religious backgrounds on campus. Such awareness events should target the general student body rather than a specific group. Campus programming may open the planning for these events to all religious affiliated organizations which gives a voice to the students associated with a more visible presence on campus (Shafer, 2012). Planning these events also allow students to gain more autonomy through developing their leadership skills.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Previous research focused on other nationalities of international students on campus or the general international population at specific institutions. Only a few studies addressed Saudi students at U.S. colleges and universities. Nonetheless, these studies did not touch upon the Islamic identity of Saudi students at Catholic institutions. The current study provided valuable information for practitioners, instructors, and administrators at Catholic institutions to be able to better serve the growing population of Saudi students at American Catholic universities. One of the main limitations of the current study is the limited number of participants which is a characteristic of qualitative research. Moreover, the uniqueness of the geographical location of PU limited generalization of the study findings to other institutions that might benefit from the research implications. However, administrators, faculty members, and student affairs professionals might select the implications that best suit their campus. Future research might take a larger sample of participants utilizing a quantitative survey. Another endeavor may try a multi-campus approach where Saudi students’ experiences might be compared and related to campus initiatives and support mechanism.
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