



# MUSLIMS ON CAMPUS





College-bound students,  
schools contend with  
rising intolerance

By Mary Stegmeir



Hannah Shraim loves learning.

The teen graduated from high school near the top of her class and continues to excel as an honors student at Montgomery College in Maryland.

Yet despite enthusiasm for her courses and extracurricular activities, the 18-year-old admits feeling uneasy some mornings as she leaves her family's home to attend class, meet with friends, or run errands. In the current political climate, Shraim says the Islamic headscarf she wears—called a hijab—is a “target for people to look at me differently.”

Hate crimes and incidents of bias against US Muslims have soared to their highest levels since the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, according to data collected by the FBI and other organizations. And as Muslim youth search for a sense of security, counselors on both sides of the desk are called to ensure their institutions remain safe and welcoming for all students.

“I really haven't known an America that was not hostile to Muslims,” said Shraim. “I've still grown up to love my country and love everything that it offers. A lot of Muslim students—we want to be involved and embraced and fully integrated into society. But with the climate that's surrounding us, it's difficult because you're being told that you're not wanted by a lot of people.”

During the run-up to the last national election, President Trump called for a registry of the country's Muslims. Once in office, he enacted a ban restricting

travel from a handful of predominantly Muslim countries—a move has been denounced by NACAC and many other educational organizations.

Anti-Muslim sentiment has also surfaced on college campuses and in K-12 schools. In the past year alone, a hijab-wearing college student suffered a concussion after being hit with a bottle on campus. Posters calling for a “Muslim-Free America” were displayed at one school. And “Trump!” was scrawled across the door of a Muslim prayer space at another.

Those words and actions hit young US Muslims “at their core,” said Shraim. She applied to colleges in the fall of 2015 and recalls debating whether she should mention religion in her Common App essay.

“I was very hesitant to talk about my Muslim identity, because you worry: What if somebody doesn't want me at their school, just because of that?” recalled Shraim, now a college sophomore.

Ultimately, the teen decided to write about her experiences. But Shraim's initial hesitancy offers a glimpse into the constant state of vigilance that many Muslim students have adopted in response to rising Islamophobia, said Mary Ann Bodine Al-Sharif, director of recruitment and admissions at Oklahoma City Community College.

“I don't want to paint a picture that our Islamic students are weak or hovering in the corner—I would say that our students are empowered and

## MUSLIM STUDENTS AND THE COLLEGE SEARCH

Looking to recruit more Muslim students to your campus? Here are five things to remember.

### 1. America's Muslim population is racially and ethnically diverse,

with foreign-born American Muslims hailing from 77 different countries. And when it comes to making decisions about where to attend college and what to study, social and cultural norms often play as large a role as religion. “Muslim students don't want to be put in a box,” said Ekhlas Ahmed, a Casco Bay High School (ME) teacher who helps prepare English language learners for college. “Some students may be comfortable taking loans, others may not. Some may be willing to go to an out-of-state school, others may want to stay close to home. The answer is different for each individual student and their family.”

### 2. Parents play a crucial role in college discussions.

It's not just the student that you're winning over to your campus, it's also the parents, said NACAC member Mary Ann Bodine Al-Sharif, director of recruitment and admissions at Oklahoma City Community College. “They want to see that there are going to be opportunities for their child to be involved and to gain some academic insight,” she said. “But more than anything, parents want to know that their son or daughter is going to be safe and accepted on your campus.”

### 3. Little gestures go a long way.

Halal food and single-sex dorms are often attractive to Muslim students. But even if your campus doesn't offer those options, providing a space for prayer is appreciated. “When students see there's a prayer space, that sends the message that your campus acknowledges differences and needs,” said Mark Braun, counselor at Crawford High School, a San Diego school that serves several immigrant families. Colleges with Islamic cultural centers

or educational programming are also attractive. “Awareness of the culture or the religion makes students more comfortable,” said Ted Critchley-Menor, a senior coach with College Possible-Minnesota.

### 4. Good information can help families make good decisions.

Officials at Elon University (NC) created a webpage highlighting prayer room options and upcoming campus events related to the Islamic faith. The Muslim Life at Elon webpage also provides answers to questions like “Can I have fun and fit in at Elon if I don't drink alcohol?” and “Are there any Muslim faculty and staff at Elon?” “You don't want to oversell your environment—we try to be as real as we can—but we want to have one place our students and staff can go for answers,” said Brooke Barnett, associate provost for academic and inclusive excellence at the university.

### 5. Statements of support make a difference.

Over 130 hate crimes against Muslims were recorded in the first half of 2017 by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which tracks incidents of hate and discrimination. The total is nearly double the number recorded by the organization during the same time period in 2016, putting 2017 on track to become one of the worst years ever for anti-Muslim hate crimes. Muslim students and families take notice when schools stand against hate, said Hannah Shraim, a sophomore at Montgomery College (MD). Last year, her college sent an email to students condemning President Trump's proposals to start a Muslim registry and build a wall along the US-Mexico border. “Taking a firm stance is important, because it shows that the direction you're going in is not the direction of bigotry,” Shraim said.

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proud of who they are,” said Bodine Al-Sharif, a NACAC member. “But there’s wear and tear. When you are constantly having to define who you are and who Muslims are, it’s like working two jobs. It’s exhausting.”

### **BATTLING STEREOTYPES**

Misperceptions about the Islamic faith and Muslims abound, and at times, the rhetoric can seem overwhelming, said Bodine Al-Sharif, who converted to the Islamic faith as an adult.

Sixteen years after 9/11, many Americans still falsely equate Muslims with terrorism. A 2016 Pew Research Center survey found that 49 percent of American adults think at least some Muslims in the US are anti-American, including 11 percent who think most or almost all Muslims are anti-American.

And those attitudes trickle-down into America’s schools and colleges. Recent polls conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding found that Muslim students in K-12 schools experience high rates of bullying because of their religious identity.

Women and girls who wear the hijab, like Shraim and Bodine Al-Sharif, report the highest rates of anti-Muslim discrimination, data shows. And oftentimes they are the targets of offensive assumptions. Common stereotypes include the belief that all Muslim women are uneducated and lack control over their lives.

“Imagine how it feels, as a young person, to be the target of that rhetoric,” said Bodine Al-Sharif.

Recently, while dining out with her son, the educator—who holds a doctorate—was accosted by another customer who demanded to know whether she spoke English.

She said she did, noting that she was born and raised in Missouri. His response? “Then why do you have that thing on your head?”

Bodine Al-Sharif told the man she was Muslim, to which he retorted: “You’re an American and you’re Muslim? There is no such thing as that.”

“We went on to have a conversation—it didn’t go rogue,” Bodine Al-Sharif said. “But I think that just shows the kind of climate our (Muslim) students find themselves in as they are discovering: Who am I? What are my goals? What do I want to do? Who do I want to become?”

On most college campuses and in many K-12 school buildings, American Muslim students make up a small minority of the study body. Worldwide, Islam is practiced by roughly 1.8 billion people—nearly a quarter of the global population. But in the US, Muslims make up just 1 percent of the population.

As a result, the unique needs of Muslim students often “get overlooked” in larger conversations about diversity, said Ka’rin Thornburg, associate director of admissions at the University of Texas at Austin and chair of NACAC’s Inclusion, Access, and Success (IAS) Committee.

Recent incidents of hate or bias toward Muslim students serve as an important reminder of the challenges they face getting to and through college, Thornburg said. NACAC’s IAS Committee organized a special educational session at the association’s 2017 National Conference examining the effects of Islamophobia and exploring ways to better support Muslim students.

In just the past year, both Harvard University and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, added full-time Muslim chaplains to their respective staffs. Like their Christian and Jewish counterparts, the new chaplains will offer support to students seeking counsel and serve the larger campus community



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by providing clear answers when questions arise regarding Islamic beliefs, practices, and traditions.

Such work is critical, because it helps dispel stereotypes, said Ekhlas Ahmed, a teacher at Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine, who also works with an afterschool program that prepares English language learners for college.

Ahmed, who is Muslim, came to America as a teenager in the early 2000s fleeing violence in Sudan. Today she helps bridge the gap between Muslim students and their peers at Casco Bay by organizing special days that encourage teens to talk about their traditions and find common ground.

“It’s so easy for us as humans to judge others or to say stereotypical things about others because we don’t know them,” Ahmed said. “But once we take that action of getting to know a person, we find so many things that we have in common. We connect with them on a more human level, and that’s what sticks out at the end of the day.”

#### **CONFRONTING HATE**

When students feel comfortable at the K-12 level, they are more likely to succeed in the classroom and more likely to pursue higher education, said Mark Braun, a counselor with the San Diego Unified School District, which kicked off a campaign this fall to combat Islamophobia within its schools.

Support from counselors and admission professionals familiar with Muslim beliefs and cultures can also increase a student’s chances of postsecondary success, added Braun. Many American Muslims were raised within immigrant or refugee families. Obtaining parental approval to attend college—whether the campus is located down the street or across the country—is often a critical step in a student’s planning process.

Observant Muslims pray five times a day and may have special dietary needs. Islamic teachings, which prohibit debt, affect the willingness of some Muslim students to take on loans to pay for school. And religious and cultural practices

related to separation of the sexes could influence where a student chooses to live while in college.

"I always encourage my students to have those conversations with their families early on," noted Braun, whose caseload includes several Muslim students, many of whom are refugees from East Africa, Iran, and Syria. "We look at colleges and we talk about ways they can make it work while staying true to their culture, true to their beliefs."

A school-sponsored trip for students at the Urban Assembly School for Criminal Justice in Brooklyn helped pave the way to college for Maria Malik. Students at the all-girls school, which serves a large Muslim population, were encouraged to bring their parents on the overnight college tour, which included stops at Yale University (CT) and Wellesley College (MA).

Malik, whose mother accompanied her on the trip, said the benefits of the tour were twofold: It showcased the unique opportunities available to students on residential campuses, and proved to her mom that college life was about more than just partying—a concern Malik said is shared by many in her community of Pakistani Muslims.

Ultimately, Malik, the eldest of six, was admitted to Princeton University (NJ) on a full scholarship. After much deliberation, her parents allowed her to attend and live in a co-ed dorm. Now a junior, she's majoring in ecology and

evolutionary biology, with a minor in global health and health policy. Malik is active in the university's Muslim Student Association and has traveled abroad, completing internships in Vietnam and Kenya.

Her college experience, she said, has been everything she hoped it would be. Yet Malik admits that the past year—when anti-Muslim rhetoric in America hit a fever pitch—was difficult at times. From 2015 to 2016, the number of US hate groups specifically targeting Muslims nearly tripled, growing from 34 to 101, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry. And in the week following Trump's election alone, 17 Muslim girls and women at K-12 schools and colleges in America reported being threatened, attacked, or having their religious attire grabbed, yanked, or pulled, CAIR data show.

Malik says she has always felt safe and supported at Princeton. Recent national events, such as the travel ban and proposed Muslim registry, left her disappointed but not defeated.

They also showed that college campuses have a role to play in erasing hate, violence, and mistrust, she said.

"A lot of other students on campus reached out to the Muslim students and put forward messages of support," Malik recalled. "Even though all this crazy stuff was going on, you saw students coming together in solidarity." ▢

—Mary Stegmeir

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