# MUSLIM AMERICAN WOMEN IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

# NAVIGATING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

by

Kimberly Jo Klein

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Has been approved

May 2019

APPROVED:

Sandra J Balkema, PhD
Committee Chair

Manijeh Daneshpour, PhD
Committee Member

Leslie Kellogg, EdD
Committee Member

Dissertation Committee

ACCEPTED:

Roberta C. Teahen, PhD, Director
Community College Leadership Program

ABSTRACT

Community colleges have committed to serve the communities where they reside. Because of the ever-changing demographic of students, colleges must be ready to examine their policies, practices, and support structures to ensure their institution continues to serve all. Students facing multiple barriers to enroll, persist, and complete must be seen and supported holistically. Muslim students, and specifically Muslim women, often strongly identify as members of multiple groups based on their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and family role. This intersectionality of identities provides a unique space to explore barriers and opportunities that community colleges must understand to better support a growing population of students.

This qualitative research study uses phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of seven Muslim American women attending a community college in Minnesota. Through confidential interviews, these women shared their experiences, aspirations, fears, and ultimately their stories.

KEY WORDS: Muslim women, community college, intersectionality, identity

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the seven Muslim American women who gave me the gift of their stories. You are all phenomenal and inspiring women. I thank each and every one of you from my whole heart. Without your willingness to share a piece of yourselves, this paper would not exist. I am honored to share your stories through this paper. May your voices be heard.

To all my students, past and present. You keep me curious, on my toes, and forever grateful. I learn so much from you each and every day.

Alan Klein, my husband, my best friend, and source of emotional support. He didn't question my decision to start an EdD program, even with an infant at home. He gave me the gift of time through hours upon hours of parenting while I attended class, studied, and even spent two solid weeks in China for a practicum experience. He provided me endless support when I needed to be encouraged, tough love when I needed to be challenged, kid day at the zoo when I needed the house to be quiet, and editing support when my paper just didn't sound quite right.

Prairie. She was only nine months old when I started this program. Without knowing it, she was a piece of why I wanted to do this degree. When I saw those big blue eyes look up at me, I knew she already had high expectations. I needed to be the role model she needed, showing her that we can be terrified and brave at the same time, doing all the things our hearts lead us to do, even when we quiver at the thought. In my efforts to try to show her how to be brave, she has taught me to be brave. For this, I'm forever grateful.

Meadow. Your impending arrival caused me to make an excited yet panicked phone call to my dissertation chair. In the journey of the writing and editing process, you arrived first. Through late night feedings, new baby snuggles, and utter exhaustion, we wrote the final draft of this paper together. Your calming breaths and adorable gassy grins fed my exhausted self to keep pushing through. You have taught me to be patient, set small attainable goals to keep moving forward, and to (mostly) trust the process. Thank you for being my writing buddy.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, community colleges have been charged with serving the community where they reside. While baccalaureate colleges and universities have historically maintained a level of exclusivity through various admissions requirements, community colleges expanded the reach of higher education for the local community, providing educational opportunities for those who thought college was not an option. Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) and Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) note the emergence of open access to education offered by community colleges as a means to upward economic opportunity for many whom college had not been available to previously. This reach extended to immigrants, ethnic minorities, first-generation students, women, those with low academic scores from high school, and people who have limited financial means. By keeping the local community as the focus, community colleges have provided affordable education, workforce development, and continuing education programs proving to be a valuable resource for community growth and development.

The financial accessibility and educational foundation that community colleges provide have been key aspects of the community college mission. According to the College Board (2019), in 2019-20 the cost of one year at public community college was just over one-third the

price of a public university. In addition, while community colleges offer a variety of general education programs designed as a foundation for continued education, they also provide training to those going into career and technical fields. Partnerships between local industry and community colleges to prepare technically skilled workers are critical to addressing the regional economic needs.

## CHANGING MISSION, ROLE, AND VIEW OF "COMMUNITY"

However, while these aspects of the community college mission have remained constant over their history, in order to maintain their overall mission of serving the community, community colleges must remain nimble, constantly being aware of the changing demographics, educational pathways, workforce needs, and industry growth within their local community.

### A CHANGING STUDENT BODY

According to the Pew Research Center (2016), Americans are more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past. With nearly 59 million immigrants arriving in the United States in the last 50 years, there has been a significant and ever-changing look to the composition of the student body of most community colleges. In 1993, Chickering and Reisser predicted that "coping with diversity" (p. 473) would be education's most significant challenge. Providing meaningful support to a diverse group of students is equally as important as it is challenging. It requires significant understanding of specific student populations, their barriers, and optimal ways to support their personal and academic needs.

In order for campuses to improve retention and completion of a diverse group of students, they need to be aware how services, academic calendars, and support systems directly impact the students being served. One example is religious holidays and the academic calendar. While Christian holidays historically have been widely observed across educational and social institutions, to serve the entire community, other religious traditions must also be considered when campus calendars are developed (Susan R. Komives, 2003, p. 48). The colleges are not serving their populations when they make students choose between their religious faith and academic requirements. When major educational events or requirements fall on religious holidays, students must choose between observing their faith or taking an exam, participating in a lab, or participating in other important experiences that may have an impact on their progress in a class or final grade.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PAYING ATTENTION TO STUDENTS' IDENTITIES

As a result of community colleges being accessible and having an open-door policy, students at these institutions often experience a wider range of challenges than those at other institution types. Students are often academically underprepared, financially unsure about how to pay for college, and concerned if they will be able to be successful in the classroom. Some students may have anxiety about being on campus, fitting in, or feeling safe. Everyday events can affect their success and erect roadblocks, such as loss of daycare or transportation; lack of family support; or emotional, financial, or spiritual limitations. Research has shown that successful students have family support and have adapted socially to the college environment (Tinto, 1993, 2012a; Watson, 2009). They are also more likely to seek out support from faculty

or college staff than their less successful peers (Vivian, 2005). Thus, it is critical that colleges understand the potential barriers that affect their students and proactively reach out to at-risk students.

George D. Kuh (2008) identified eight risk factors that impact college students' persistence and graduation rates:

- Being academically underprepared for college-level work
- Not entering college directly after high school
- Attending college part-time
- Being a single parent
- Being financially independent (i.e., students who rely on their own income or savings and whose parents are not sources of income for meeting college costs)
- Caring for children at home
- Working more than thirty hours per week
- Being a first-generation college student. (p. 69)

The author notes that students who have two or more of these identified risk factors are more likely than their peers without these risk factors to drop out. Watson (2009) also notes "having expectation of failure" and "lacking social support" are also risk factors for success and completion. Considering the overlap between the characteristics of community college students and the risk factors listed above, it is no surprise many students confront numerous roadblocks that limit their ability to complete their education.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) assert that students move through seven vectors, or "areas of concern" in their development as students: (1) developing competence, (2) managing

emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity. While this development is not linear or sequential, during their college careers students will be at various points along the vectors, may have to revisit vectors, and skip some vectors while moving through others. Further, students from diverse populations may navigate the vectors differently. For example, McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa (1990) suggest that while the vectors could apply to a diverse group, the racial or cultural background of the student may impact how each vector is navigated and ultimately fulfilled. Thus, if campus professionals base their supports and approaches using only European American experiences, traditions, and values, the institutions will be missing opportunities to adequately and appropriately support the diverse populations they serve (McEwen et al., 1990).

Until the early 1990s, the majority of identity and student development theories have been based on awareness and research surrounding white men or, in some cases, broadened marginally to include white men and women. Identity based research, such as Helms' racial identity theory (1993, 1994), and Phinney's ethnic identity work (1993) opened the way to research and theories based exclusively on the experience of marginalized identities. While some literature focuses on identity development within the context of race or ethnicity, the intersectionality of various identities, including religion, is a relatively new topic to be studied within student development (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Jones and McEwen's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (2000) highlights both a core identity and a more externally defined set of socially constructed identities, such as race, gender, culture, and religion. This model, though limited to identity development, is critical to understanding the multiple factors of an

individual's multiple identities and how they may interact with one another, including understanding a person's likelihood of succeeding in various social and educational environments.

Family dynamics and influences are critical factors of an individual's identity, and also have a significant impact on whether a student even considers college, let alone applies and persists to degree completion. A student's initial decision to find, open, and complete an application form can be influenced by their family members' education, job position, and support. Within the seven vectors of their development as students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), family influence enters the picture and is significant in many areas. Moving through the stages of developing autonomy, managing emotions, forming a personal identity, and developing integrity and purpose, students can be greatly influenced by their family and their family members' backgrounds.

Students bring many factors with them that influence their persistence in college. While most campuses consider completion aspects, such as motivation, personal and professional goals, current personal responsibilities, previous academic success, and financial resources, there are many more critical things to consider. When students walk through the door into the college, they bring their entire self. Race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, and other key factors play a role in how the student shows up, interacts with their surroundings, and how they are perceived by those around them. Jones and McEwen (2000) assert that an individual's identity cannot be understood singularly, but rather must be considered in the context of one's core identity —personal attributes, characteristics, identity — and those factors that are externally defined, such as gender, race, culture, and religion. Further, students navigating even

slight disconnects among their multiple identities may experience pressure to pick an identity based on the social context in which they find themselves — either by choosing purposefully or by accepting what others "assign" to them. The Multidimensional Identity Model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991) highlights four potential ways to resolve identity definition: (1) the individual self-identifies with a single piece of their true self, (2) the individual allows society, such as their family, a peer group, or similar, to select and focus on a single aspect of the person's identity, (3) the individual connects with multiple pieces of their identity, however lives them separately, (4) the individual chooses to identify with multiple identity groups but continues to search for ways they may intersect.

**PROVIDING SUPPORT BASED ON STUDENTS' IDENTITIES**

Each community college campus provides support based on the local student population. While overall this is a benefit to students, there can often be a delay in updating existing services and offering new services as quickly as the population needs change. Additionally, limited resources may dictate the number and scope of services that can be provided. For example, while some institutions are adding LGBTQ+ support groups, childcare centers, and multicultural centers, others are eliminating these services for others as they seek to meet students' needs. Overall, Veteran Support Services have continued to increase after President Obama announced the ***8 Keys to Veterans Success*** on Campus call to action, going from 250 institutions to now 2,290 colleges and universities committed to supporting veterans in just six years ("8 keys to veterans' success sites," 2019). In some institutions, however, women's centers and childcare centers that were prevalent a few years ago are being cut due

to funding, staffing, or usage concerns. For instance, between 2005 and 2015, the number of campus based childcare centers declined in thirty-six states (Eckerson et al., 2016). The decision surrounding which of these supports to add or cut at times seems to be random to students, however, is frequently driven by funding sources, including federal and state grants.

To help offset limited funding, some institutions move identity-based supports to student-run campus clubs and organizations. While there are significant benefits to this model, there are also drawbacks. One noteworthy benefit of channeling support through student organizations is that students are more likely to benefit from gaining information from a peer with a similar identity feature — culture, religion, gender — who has been successful in navigating the campus, versus a staff or faculty member (Tinto, 1993).

Research consistently shows student engagement, a sense of belonging, and feeling supported on campus positively impacts student retention (Astin, 1975; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Tinto, 2012a) yet often the importance of the connection between academic performance and individual developmental needs is overlooked (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Additionally, academic, social, and financial support increases the likelihood of student success. Specifically for minority students, student support centers can provide a safe space to feel welcome and surrounded by others who identify similarly, find themselves in similar struggles, and who otherwise might feel out of place on campus (Tinto, 2012b).

Astin (1975), Bean (1990), and Tinto (1993) assert that the level of social and academic integration play a role in student retention and persistence. An identity mismatch between an institution and student can cause student attrition, as "social identity is sometimes as important as intellectual identity" (Tinto, 1993, p. 53). Students make a decision on college

based on a variety of factors. A financial aid package, major program(s) of interest, location, physical environment, and specific social opportunities can all affect how students perceive an institution, and ultimately make a decision whether or not to attend (Reid, 2017). Even the college officials who represent the institution can affect how the institution is perceived: "institutional fit" will be perceived differently if the college official is not representative of the demographics of students applying to the institution. Mismatches become obvious when, while trying to appeal to a broad group, institutions may not provide accurate information that allows students to determine if they will truly fit in at the institution. This can happen, for example, when in attempts to appeal to a diverse group of students, campus brochures highlight an ethnically diverse group of students, when in reality the vast majority of campus is Caucasian.

Because social integration is a critical factor in student persistence in college, institutions must ensure that students will feel welcomed, not only to a generally diverse campus, but to spaces where their unique identities can be cultivated and understood. Students who are in environments perceived to be nurturing and supportive are able to internally accept and articulate each area of their whole identity (Stewart, 2008), even when navigating an intersection of identities, such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender. Tinto (2012a) and Watson (2009) have emphasized that an interdisciplinary approach to supporting students is needed. While early intervention programs, first-year student programs, and mentoring programs are promising, at-risk students benefit from a multifaceted approach.

## WHAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES MUST CONTINUE TO DO: THE NEED FOR THIS STUDY

Students are more successful in environments where they see and can gather with others like themselves. Thus, while demographics may differ campus to campus, colleges must be aware of and sensitive to the identities of their student population and create spaces, not only for anyone to gather, but for specific identity groups to meet and support one another. These spaces offer students a place where they can truly be themselves, without worry or fear of judgment, code switching, or the need to select or project a particular "identity" to present to others.

While research on the needs of various student populations is increasing, one group that has been under-represented in research is Muslim students. The Muslim population in the United States has been one of the fastest growing religious populations. The Pew Research Center estimated that a total of 3.45 million Muslims lived in the United States in 2017. (Mohamed, 2018). While currently the third largest religious group in the United States, research suggests it will move to the second largest, surpass the country's Jewish population, by 2040 (Mohamed, 2018).

For Muslim students in the U.S. higher education system, integrating can be difficult. Not only are there religious practices, such as daily prayer, that can be difficult to follow in the academic environment, but the religious holidays and observations do not fit within the typical academic calendar. For Muslim women, there are even more difficulties; there is a consistent pressure for women in general to conform, and Muslim women who wear hijab are easily identified as Muslim (Mir, 2003) and, thus, outside of the norm among the student population.

Finding themselves the minority in most educational situations, these women do not always have mentors, spaces for prayer, or other Muslim women to provide support and friendship.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to better understand the challenges faced by the specific population of Muslim women students in the community college, the researcher developed three central research questions.

1. How do the social and religious expectations of the Muslim faith affect Muslim women who pursue higher education?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their initial decision to attend college and/or pursue a career?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their ability to continue and complete their college education and/or pursue a career?
    - Which aspect of the individual's personal identity has the most effect on her pursuit of an education?
2. How do community colleges currently help or hinder Muslim women as they pursue an education?
    - What supports for academic aspects, such as appropriate career counseling and opportunities, do community colleges provide?
    - What supports for religious aspects, such as prayer and holiday observances, do community colleges provide?
    - What supports for social aspects, such as interactions with other Muslim students and interactions with other college students, do community colleges provide?
3. What can, or should, community colleges do to increase, improve, or enhance their support for Muslim women students, as well as any students who vary from the majority religious and social norms?

## THE SETTING FOR THIS STUDY

This study was conducted at a community college located in Minnesota. Serving almost 15,000 students a year in for credit courses, the college serves a diverse group of learners with nearly two-thirds of degree-seeking students coming from families of parents who have no college education, low-income families, and / or students of color. The researcher chose the college because of its diverse population and active Muslim Student Association.

## THE RESEARCH PLAN

The ever-changing demographic seen within community colleges shows the need for institutions to better understand the specific needs of their students. While most institutions make significant efforts to provide support services, many are broad initiatives and do not meet needs of specific populations of students, particularly those who are traditionally marginalized.

In order to enhance understanding of a diverse community college population, focused studies are needed. Even with multiple theories and research focused on college student development, limited studies explore the application of these theories of development to a minority population, specifically in relationship to religion, gender, and education.

For this study, the researcher individually interviewed seven Muslim women who have attended a community college located in the Midwestern United States. Each research participant was asked a series of questions that focused on three primary areas:

1. Personal narrative about research subject. Context, background, family information
2. Decision to attend college and relationship with education and college experience
3. The intersection and navigation of religious identity and multiple other identities as a student

The purpose of open-ended questions was to give research participants control over the information they shared, while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up and clarifying questions. The researcher was focused on learning directly from the lived experience of the research participants through a qualitative phenomenological study.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this research study and to provide clarity, the following definitions are listed below. The following terms are used throughout this study and are defined here to aid understanding and comprehension.

- Code switching – when speakers seamlessly alternates between "codes" or language, based on their surroundings and people. Does not only reflect on someone's ability to be multilingual, however further speaks to intersectionality and the part that language plays in identity
- Going to the gemba – Gemba is a Japanese word for "the actual place". Going to the gemba, in turn, refers to seeking out truth from the source, where things are happening, and/or the person who has the information from actual experience
- Eid – festival or celebration. There are two main celebrations in the Muslim year. Eid al-fitr (celebrated at the end of Ramadan) and Eid al-Adha (honors the devotion of Prophet Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son for God).
- Hijab – A covering worn by some Muslim women. While some use hijab to refer to the headscarf others use the term to reference modest clothing. In this paper, the term is used to mean headscarf.
- Intersectionality – A theoretical framework exploring and explaining how one's various identities (race, religion, political, gender, etc) come together to create unique modes of discrimination or disadvantage
- Islam – A religion. The religious faith of Muslims.
- MSA – Muslim Student Association found on college campuses in the United States and Canada

- Ramadan – celebrated in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. A month a fasting and prayer
- Student centrality – "The extent to which being a student is important to one's self-image or identity" (Bowman & Felix, 2017, p. 235).

**CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

Although community colleges have continued their mission of serving their communities, challenges and opportunities have risen due to the ever-changing student demographic. Student needs, both in academic support and personal challenges, have highlighted the diversity of students being served. The expanding range of student needs and the growing risk factors keeping students from completing their education has caused community college leadership to examine types of support they can put into place. Understanding the importance of creating a welcoming environment and the positive effects of students having a sense of belonging and feeling empowered when they work with others of similar identity (Astin, 1975; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Tinto, 2012a), many institutions are creating identity-based spaces, clubs, and organizations.

While research examining identity-based issues is becoming more prevalent, Muslim women in higher education is a group that has received limited attention. This study will explore challenges faced by Muslim women attending community colleges as they tell their stories of self-actualization, discovery, and educational attainment.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

While the open-door policy of community colleges expands the reach of education to a broad group of learners who may not otherwise pursue education, it also expands the service and support needs a college may need to consider. As our local communities continue to change and evolve in their constituency, services provided by community colleges need to be evaluated and explored to ensure they continue to meet the needs of students. This review of literature synthesizes current research in student development, retention, and persistence, including community college support structures as they pertain to various minority groups.

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

A vast amount of student development research has stemmed from Erik Erikson's psychosocial eight stages of identity development. Erikson believed when navigating one's identity, the focus was within areas of relationships, vocational decisions, and ideological believe and values. It is important to note Erikson's work focused on the experience of men exploring their identity (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's fifth stage of identity development, "Identity versus role confusion," is noted as a key piece in future research for traditionally aged college students (Jones & Abes, 2013). In this stage of development, "Who am I?" is the prominent theme as the transition from childhood to adulthood is explored and navigated.

Expanding upon Erikson's research, Chickering and Reiser's Vectors of Student Development first emerged in 1969 and later updated in 1993. Chickering and Reiser proposed the vectors as a map, with the understanding students move through at different rates, in different directions, and may have to revisit some areas. They did add a suggested sequence to the vectors only as some would provide a stronger foundation. The movement to and through the seven vectors: (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity is related not only to the individual student, but also the institutional size, student/faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, student communities, and student programs and services.

Tinto (1993) identified three major reasons for student departure: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve educational and occupational goals, and the failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. He noted that academic and social integration are a complementary part of the process. Further, Tinto emphasized that various student groups, such as African American students, students from low income households, as well as others, may require group-specific interventions.

The work of Tinto, as well as Chickering and Reiser, emerged as the lens through which much of the research into college student identity was built. While these set a strong foundation, in their early work, none of them directly explored the interaction of race, culture, or religious identities in relation to their models.

Jones and McEwen's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (2000) brought to light the reality of multiple personal and social identities. This model brought together the growing

number of complexities related to individual identities and the intersection of identity in cognitive and psychosocial identity and extending to the work related to Critical Race Theory examining the effect of embedded racism in U.S. culture. While the results of these studies have had effect on community colleges and the support services they provide, their effect is less direct and targeted.

## RETENTION, PERSISTENCE, AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Research in higher education has long had a focus on retention, persistence, and student success. Tinto and Cullen (1973) built their work with a foundation in sociology, noting that students have a variety of characteristics that will impact support needs, such as gender, race, academic aptitude, and socioeconomic status. Astin (1975) found students are more likely to persist in college if their institution had an over-arching identity that matched their own; students from small towns do better at small colleges; black students persist at a higher rate at historically black institutions compared with predominantly white institutions. Later, Bean (1990) stressed the importance of student integration into college, insisting that retention is directly related to the interaction between the student and the institution.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) found that family influence on student development is significant in many areas: Moving through autonomy, managing emotions, forming a personal identity, developing integrity and purpose all can be greatly influence by family of origin.

Several studies (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Tinto, 1993) found that, when students feel they are part of a community and have a sense of belonging and support on campus, they are more likely to persist and complete their

degree. Additionally, Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) assert that students need to feel integrated into their new (campus) community. The greater the student's feeling of belonging, the more likely they are to persist in their educational goals. Kuh et al. (2005) further explored student feelings of belonging, noting that a connection to campus "help students connect with their peers and the institution" (p. 119) and can be attributed to degree completion.

Astin (1999) and Tinto (2012) found that students must see themselves as having meaningful involvement in at least one campus community for retention to be positively impacted. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) expanded on research by Tinto noting that frequent informal academic check ins with students are another key piece of academic integration on campus. Later, Kuh et.al (2005) noted that a sense of belonging supports students building a relationship with the campus and their peers. These relationships in turn promote persistence in education and satisfaction with one's experience.

Tinto's work (2012) examined campus integration and campus environment in more depth. He found that students, especially those in minority groups, form "cognitive maps" when talking with peers about a campus. This work built on his earlier (1993) findings that physical, social, and academic landscapes are woven together by peers who have already successfully navigated the college experience. These interactions support the new student in finding a sense of belonging, both within the college and identity specific communities.

Luke, Redekop, and Burgin (2015) confirmed earlier research by Bean (2005) that students who find a connection between their academic work and future career will more likely be retained. Bean's work defined nine themes of student retention that provided meaningful

ways to identify and measure areas of vocational development in relation to student retention; findings that Luke, Redekop, and Burgin's research reinforced with findings of students who reported a stronger connection between work and school had a greater intent to return.

More recently, Mutakibbir and Nuriddin (2016) indicated that, to ensure effective student engagement on campus, higher education institutions must take a holistic approach, considering external community, cultural background, and religious identity of its study body.

A 2017 study by Bowman and Felix identified a student's self-image as an important factor in goal commitment and the decision to persist. Their study results indicated student centrality is as important as social and academic integration for student persistence, suggesting practitioners explore opportunities to provide opportunity for students to become integrated into the student experience, which may support student centrality. Millea, Wills, Elder, and Molina (2018) looked simultaneously at three areas of college student retention research: institutional, student attributes, and financial considerations. Their findings indicated institutions should focus on maintaining smaller class sizes and minimizing student financial restraints.

As researchers explore the complex interactions between student identity, engagement, and persistence, the job of higher education in providing an inviting and welcoming environment for learning is becoming more complicated as well.

## FACTORS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IMPACTING STUDENT SUCCESS

W. E. Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) first noted seven non-cognitive variables that were critical for minority students. Tracey and Sedlacek (1985) used of the Non-cognitive

Questionnaire to show that the attitudes of entering students were predictive academic success four years later. Further, they were able to show that non-cognitive variables were more predictive of college persistence than academic ability. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that meeting the needs of diverse groups of learners will be a significant challenge for higher education: "The impact of a given curriculum, course, teacher, residence hall, or fellow student will vary according to the characteristic of the student experiencing the situation or person.... We own very different vehicles and we do not all drive the same way. We bring our roots with us — our culture, class, gender, and race" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 474).

Research by McEwen et al. (1990) and Sedlacek, W.E. (1999) found that students whose racial or ethnic culture doesn't align with the predominate culture of the student population, adjusting to college life is more challenging than when one's culture matches.

Stewart (2008)'s research with Black college students recognized when students of multiple identities felt supported in an environment, they were able to name and use all of their identities. Through the experiences of six African American students, Koshino (2016) found a lack of culturally relevant advising, limited faculty of color, lack of awareness around culturally responsive teaching, and general lack of a support system contributed to students of color feeling isolated and disengaged. The author suggested these patterns can lead to academic probation and often early departure from college.

**GENDER IMPACTING STUDENT SUCCESS**

Another aspect of individual identity and its effect on student success is gender and gender identity. However, research in the area examining a student's gender, gender identity,

and success completing higher education is limited. Most of the existing research focuses on multiple identities and the complex "intersectionality" of identities, as coined by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989). The social and psychological aspects of gender identity are complex and are only recently becoming the focus of critical research, with very little focusing on educational attainment and success.

Mohanty (2003) recognized that women of color in particular have a burden of race, class, ability, and body size which they are continuously navigating. A study by Halpern (2016) examined parent behaviors and parent beliefs about gender roles and found that parent behaviors regarding gender are better predictors for a child's attitude on gender than the parents' beliefs about gender roles. Halpern concluded that a mother's behavior was especially influential on a child's assumptions of the child's own gender. For example, mothers who practiced more traditional behaviors resulted in the daughters displaying more stereotypes of female roles. Other sociological studies have examined the connection between gender identity and security issues. Hoogensen and Rottem (2016), for example, examined "inconsistent" gender identity and culturally accepted behavioral norms.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IMPACT ON EDUCATION

Studies exploring education and religion are historically focused on religiously affiliated universities and haven't focus on the religious identity of students, nor the impact on their educational journey.

An early study by Cherry and Associates (2001) consisted of a case study involving four universities: a large public state university in the west; a Lutheran liberal arts college in the

north; a Roman Catholic school in the eastern United States; and a traditionally African-American college with Presbyterian roots in the south. Their conclusion, which stated, "It is possible that young people in American culture have never been more enthusiastically engaged in religious practice or with religious ideas" (p. 294), showed a change from previous studies, such as Bowen's (1997), showing college as having a negative impact on religious beliefs.

More current research has shown religious minorities to have additional challenges in pursuing higher education. Patten and Rice (2009) conducted a study on 1,870 college freshman students entering a conservative Christian university. In their findings, student who identified in the minority religious affiliation were 11.2% less likely to persist from freshman to sophomore year than those who identified in the majority.

Mutakabbir and Nuriddin's (2016) work noted that, although in 2010 the civil rights protection guidelines specifically expanded the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include protections against religion-based discrimination, and while some protections are in place, many areas still pose a challenge, particularly to the religious minority. For example, the academic calendar, even at public, non-secular institutions, tend to accommodate the religious majority (Christian) holidays, with winter break over Christmas, and Spring Break or Training Days over Easter. They also noted that campus dining options can also post a challenge for the religious minority. While it might be common practice for dining services to provide meatless options on Fridays during Lent for Catholics, the dietary requirements for the religious minority may not be provided. Kosher dining facilities for Jewish students, extended hours for Muslim students during Ramadan, and food options that exclude pork for Muslim students are just a few examples of overlooked dining needs for students in the religious minority.

While other religious minorities also face challenges in relation to equality and their educational journey, because this study focuses on Muslim students, this review limits detailed review to those studies related to Muslim students. Mir (2006, 2009, 2014) contributed significantly to the research of religious minorities by exploring the experience of Muslim women as they navigate religious authenticity, personal identity development, and how marginalized students navigate the university campus culture. Through interviews with Muslim college students, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) revealed that Muslim students often are most concerned about being judged as a "Muslim terrorist" or as an "oppressed Muslim woman." Students also felt the constant need to manage other's impressions of them. While these are not directly related to academic life, these constant feelings of fear of judgment interfere with day-to-day activities, which can lead to disruption in academics.

Nasir and Al-Amin's (2006) study also found that finding a space for daily prayer was another anxiety producing task for Muslim students. During prayer, students are "vulnerable and highly visible" (p. 25). While many Muslim students fear that others will not understand the process of prayer, they also feel uncomfortable with others' seeing them pray, knowing that they are Muslim, and potentially viewing them as terrorists or as oppressed. Some students actively countered such potential misperceptions by informing others about the beliefs and practices of Islam in their daily conversations. But in doing so, they took on the burden of representing all Muslims and feeling the need to prove that Muslims are not really like their stereotypes. In a limited study, Rangoonwala, Sy, and Epinoza (2011) found that Muslim women who followed Islamic standards of dress were better adjusted to campus life; they asserted,

"college adjustment may be hindered by one's self identification as a Muslim not by one's outward appearance" (Rangoonwala et al., 2011, p. 238).

## IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE OF CAMPUS SUPPORT

Research focusing on campus support has been prevalent since the mid 1980s. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven principles for best practice in undergraduate education. From this research and publication, an Institutional Inventory was developed to allow institutions to better assess their services.

Scholossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) identified Entering Services (recruitment, financial aid, testing, registration), Support Services (academic and career advising, personal counseling, child care, mentoring, student organizations), and Culminating Services (internships, resume writing, job search support, commencement) as three areas of services needed on campus to assist students in successfully moving through education.

Research that examines the value of prayer or meditation space on campus includes studies by Nasir and Al-Amin (2006), Mahalingappa, Rodriguez, and Polat (2017); Mutakabbir and Nuriddin (2016). Mutakabbir and Nuriddin (2016) found that religious spaces on campus are a sign to students they are recognized on campus, versus simply being tolerated. Prayer or meditation rooms are one such space where students, especially those in the religious minority, are able to find a connection to campus in a space they are not the "other." Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) and Mutakabbir and Nuriddin (2016) recommend having access to prayer space, noting the importance of having access to wash, separate space for women and men, as well as privacy to allow to practice without the feeling of judgment.

Kuh et al. (2005) agreed that students need to form connection on campus. "Access without effective support is not opportunity" is how Tinto (2008) concluded his keynote address at the National Institute for Staff and Organizational development at the University of Texas Austin. He asserted that, while progress has been made in providing support to at risk students, institutions need to examine not only the personal characteristics of incoming students, but the qualities of the institution and how the educational setting impacts student learning and success.

In Redesigning the Community College, Bailey et al. (2015), assert that the current service model in community colleges has poorly designed support services. Much of the current research in Guided Pathways is based on the understanding that students need connected, purposeful, and structured supports in both academic and social settings.

Research has shown clearly that mentors, high school teachers, and religious leaders all can play a role for students enrolling and then persisting in college. Tinto (2012a) asserts that mentoring can mean the difference between a student leaving or staying, especially for first generation, low income, and academically underprepared students. These relationships give students someone to ask questions and lean on for academic and social support. In her study of non-traditional community college student parents, Peterson (2016) found that counselors, advisors, and faculty support all contribute to student success.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In brief, student development theory and research in related subjects has not grown and developed at the same pace as the demographics have changed in community colleges.

While many student development theories have come out of Erikson's psychosocial identity development theory, this work does not always reflect the experiences of our diverse student population. More recently, Kimberlé Crenshaw's exploration and introduction of Intersectionality, Jones and McEwen's Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, and Critical Race Theory, have begun to bring to light current issues and needs of our students. Further, studies have shown (McEwen, et al., 1990, Sedlacek, W.E., 1999, Stewart, 2008, and Matababbir and Nuriddin, 2016) students are more likely to be retained, graduate, and have an overall better college experience if their racial or ethnic identity aligns with the college and they are able to be in spaces with others who identity as they do.

Gender and Religious identity also have impacts on education and student success, and students who identify within multiple areas of a minority identity face even greater challenges. Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) noted Muslim students find practicing their religion in the context of school often anxiety producing. Mir (2006, 2009, 2014) found Muslim women spent a significant amount of time balancing between identities, navigating through to stay true to their self, their religious ideals, and multiple other identities.

The conclusion is that community colleges must continue to evolve, specifically in areas of student services and campus support for students. Understanding the needs of our changing student population is critical as colleges continue to find best practices in supporting students

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

## INTRODUCTION

This study was carried out in an effort to better understand the experiences, identity and religious development, and support systems of self-identified Muslim American female students in a community college located in Minnesota. This study was specifically interested in the intersection of these identities and the experience of the students navigating through identity development. The researcher was additionally curious about whether the educational environment is supportive, or inhibitive to their growth.

While research on single identities and developmental implications exist, there is limited research on the developmental intersection of religion, gender, and education. To best support a student's journey and assist them in navigating multiple identities, it is important for educators to understand how multiple identities impact a student's identity development. Jones and Abes (2013) assert that women in particular feel "pressure to prove themselves" (p. 74), and this pressure becomes more complex when multiple identities are involved.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the movement through identity and religious development of Muslim American women in the community college environment. Specifically, this study shares the stories and experiences of seven Muslim American women attending a Midwestern Community College (MCC) in Minnesota. These

individuals shared their journey to and through education, speak about their support systems, and how they have experienced internal struggle through living multiple identities.

In-depth conversational interviews were conducted with seven female students who identified as Muslim American and were attending or had attended a specific Midwestern community college. The researcher examined the movement of each subject through identity development and religious fluidity in relationship to their educational experiences. In Chapter Four of this study, each individual student story is presented, and following the stories, a thorough analysis of the interview text examines the research questions and emerging themes illustrated by the data.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND RATIONALE

The researcher chose to complete a qualitative over a quantitative study because of the limitations of institutional data and the value of the individual story in learning. As reflected in Chapter Two, regularly collected institutional data does not include religious identity, making it a challenge to identify participants for a quantitative study. By conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher was able to combine the rich individual experiences of several similar stories to "help distill the essence of a phenomena" (Reavill, 1996) and focus "on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013). Witherell (1991) suggests there is a long, valuable history of hearing and telling stories in learning. The qualitative model of one-to-one interviews allowed the researcher to build rapport with student participants and hear authentic stories of their journey, including their experience as Muslim women in college, how they make meaning of their own experience, and

how they've progressed through their educational journey while moving through identity development. While the researcher used experiences from the research participants to form generalized themes and make recommendations for community colleges to best support Muslim women, the researcher doesn't want this to minimize the individual experiences. For this reason, Chapter Four tells the individual stories to showcase the value of each.

Merriam (2009) describes three components which are critical pieces to qualitative research: "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). Allowing the research subjects to tell their stories prooved meaningful to learning directly from those who experience the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenology, is "a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) and to "investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identity the core essence of human experience or phenomena described by research participants" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 32). This type of study allows the researcher to gain a deeper look into a person's lived experience by "going to the gemba."

In preparation for this study, the researcher completed a limited review of multiple studies with similar frameworks, goals, and diverse populations. This informed the study, process, and development of questions for this study. Two studies in particular stood out and provided the foundation for the research design.

First, ***Constructing Third Spaces: American Muslim Undergraduate Women's Hybrid Identity Construction***, by Dr. Shabana Mir (2006), was conducted with undergraduate students who identified as Muslim women at George Washington University and Georgetown University. This study, as well as Dr. Mir's subsequent text, ***Muslim American Women on Campus*** (2014),

gave significant insight to this study. The researcher also gained permission from Dr. Mir (and her publisher) to use interview questions from her previously mentioned work.

The second study that assisted in molding this design was ***Promise and Paradox: The Experience of Hmong Women in College***, by Dr. Lisa Reavill (1996). Reavill conducted a phenomenology study by interviewing seven Hmong women who attended a local state university. Her particular interest was learning from the research participants' story versus answering specific questions.

Initially, this researcher met with three acquaintances who identified as Muslim women and who had previously attended a community college. The purpose of these meetings was to review culturally sensitive topics, religious holidays, and potential questions to be asked of the research participants. After receiving feedback, the researcher adjusted timelines and questions.

Based on the pre-research and inquiries, as well as the researcher's understanding of counseling theory and practice, the interview questions were designed to be flexible and provide foundational questions and information, but also allow each research participant to tell her story in a way that was comfortable to her.

This study is important to the researcher because of her unique experience supporting Muslim students in her work with Community Colleges. She found the Muslim women she supported were very motivated and had a desire to complete their college degree and transfer to a bachelor's degree program. While their drive and grit were evident, there was often a hesitation or something lingering holding them back. The researcher wanted to learn more

about the educational journey and support networks of Muslim Women to better understand how to support Muslim women in education.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was focused on the following research questions. The first two are aimed at the participants, to help understand their educational experiences. The third question examines the implications of the participants' experiences and is aimed at the next steps of applying this information to enhance the support services provided by community colleges.

1. How do the social and religious expectations of the Muslim faith affect Muslim women who pursue higher education?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their initial decision to attend college and/or pursue a career?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their ability to continue and complete their college education and/or pursue a career?
    - Which aspect of the individual's personal identity has the most effect on her pursuit of an education?
2. How do community colleges currently help or hinder Muslim women as they pursue an education?
    - What supports for academic aspects, such as appropriate career counseling and opportunities, do community colleges provide?
    - What supports for religious aspects, such as prayer and holiday observances, do community colleges provide?
    - What supports for social aspects, such as interactions with other Muslim students and interactions with other college students, do community colleges provide?
3. What can, or should, community colleges do to increase, improve, or enhance their support for Muslim women students, as well as any students who vary from the majority religious and social norms?

**PARTICIPANTS**

Research participants were selected from a single community college located in Minnesota, known from here on as Midwestern Community College, or MCC. To be eligible for the study, the student must have been attending or have attended Midwestern Community College, be at least 18 years old, and identify as a Muslim female.

As noted previously, one of the reasons the college was selected for this study is because it has an active Muslim student organization. Thus, to obtain permission to conduct the study, the researcher contacted the Director of Student Life at Midwestern Community College, the faculty advisor for the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the campus TRiO department, and other representatives of student support programs that serve a diverse student population. This communication was conducted through email, explained the research study, included the IRB-approved recruitment message, and asked these representatives if they would either forward the message directly to qualifying students, or provide the researcher's contact information to them. Thirteen students initially showed interest in participating in the study. Of those thirteen, seven actively participated in the study. The table below provides a description of the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Study Participants

| Pseudonym | Age | Race and/or Ethnicity as defined by participants | Country of birth | Family Status | 1st college semester | Major | Completion Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raniya | 23 | Pakistani American | United States | • Lives with parents | Fall 2012 | Biology, A.S. | MCC graduate; transfer to 4-year college |
| Hodan | 26 | African American | Somalia | • Married. Lives with husband | Fall 2010 | Early Childhood Education | Currently at MCC |

| Pseudonym | Age | Race and/or Ethnicity as defined by participants | Country of birth | Family Status | 1st college semester | Major | Completion Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amina | 23 | African / Latina | United States | • Lives on own | Fall 2012 | Liberal Arts | MCC graduate; transfer to 4-year college |
| Samira | 19 | African American | United States | • Lives with both parents<br>• Parents separating<br>• Mother primary caregiver | Spring 2017 | Education A.S. | Currently at MCC |
| Sahra | 26 | African American | Somalia | • Married. Lives with husband and children | Fall 2010 | Liberal Arts / Elem. Education | Currently at MCC |
| Yasmin | 19 | Middle Eastern white | Syria | • Lives with parents | Summer 2016 | Liberal Arts / Medical School | Currently at MCC |
| Lina | 20 | Somali / African American | United States | • Lives with parents | Fall 2015 | Communications / Marketing A.A. | Currently at MCC |

**INTERVIEW PROCESS**

Participants were interviewed individually on one or two separate occasions to allow them to share their story in a private environment. At the beginning of the interview, students were asked a series of demographic questions. Through a series of open-ended questions, the interview was divided into three major themes: Personal Narrative, Educational Journey, and Navigation of Religious Identity. This allowed for students to tell their personal story, as well as the researcher to ask clarifying questions.

All participants signed an informed consent document that explained the purpose of the study and agreed to allow the researcher to take written notes and audio record the interviews.

Participants understood their identities would be kept confidential and their real names would not be used in the publication of the research. After a research participant agreed to participant in the study, interviews were scheduled at a date, time, and location convenient to the research participant, typically near or at the school they were attending at the time or had attended previously. Due to the personal nature of the research questions, interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private or semi-private space, e.g., a library study room. Interview time with each participant was an average of 70 minutes. All participants agreed to allow the researcher to contact them via phone or email if there was a need to clarify any information after the face-to-face interview.

## TREATMENT OF THE DATA

All interviews were recorded to ensure accurate collection of information. Following the interviews, the researcher hired a transcriptionist to transcribe each interview. The researcher used the transcriptions to summarize each participant's story, as presented in Chapter Four. Each interview's structure was maintained, and extensive direct quotations were used to ensure that the participant's voice remained as genuine as possible. To improve readability, minor revisions to grammar or sentence structure were made to the participants' responses; however, no changes were made that would have affected the intent or content of the response.

### DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

The researcher used phenomenological analysis and representation to review the data. After reviewing the interview transcripts and notes the researcher tells the personal story of

each research subject, to "depict the essence or basic structure of experience" (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). The researcher then went through all transcripts again to make notes in the margins, highlight themes, and pull out important quotes or phrases. Next, the researcher grouped words and phrases of significance into a document, noting which research question it may answer. The researcher then grouped these words and phrases into units based on common ideas, thoughts, and words. Finally, the researcher further narrowed the units into three final overarching categories or themes.

### RESEARCHER BIAS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Any biases and assumptions in this study come from the researcher's experience working with at-risk students, specifically Muslim women in the community college setting. In the researcher's work with similar students as a counselor and advisor, the researcher became aware of multiple factors in students' lives that appeared to contribute to student attrition, including a struggle to find balance living with multiple identities. In working with this population, the researcher also noticed the impact family had on a student's retention, persistence, and completion in college. Those observations led to this in-depth study of students with similar backgrounds to one another, with the intent to better understand and serve diverse students.

## LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include three factors. First, although the participants self-identified as Muslim, they come from varied ethnic, cultural, and family backgrounds. One must remember that while all participants were Muslim women, they each have a unique ethnic,

cultural, and family lens through which they process their identity. Ali-Karamali (2012, p. 190) reminds us that "culture is often more influential than religion." Thus, while the participants' religious identity was the primary lens for this study, we must recognize that their complex identity extends well beyond this one feature. Second, we must be cautious to not generalize the findings of this study to all Muslim women or any other demographic population. The participants in this study shared their personal stories to help inform future practice and understanding; however, making assumptions about a broad group should not be done. Third, the setting for this study is an urban community college in a large, culturally diverse metropolitan area. The educational opportunities available to the women interviewed for this study are many, and the cultural influences on them and their families are also extensive.

The delimitations of this study pertain to the interview results. Because the researcher kept the interview process as open and flexible as possible to encourage involvement and self-disclosure, some of the participants were by nature more reticent and less forthcoming than the others. Thus, several of the narratives included in Chapter Four provide a bit less detail and elaboration than others.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The researcher utilized a phenomenological methodology to conduct a study of experiences had by seven Muslim American female students attending a Minnesota Community College. The researcher had a foundation of three broad topics that aimed to better understand the participants' experience in getting to and persisting through higher education, and how the information might be applied to enhance future student support services.

The interviews were transcribed allowing the researcher to share information in two ways. First, the participants' stories are shared in chapter four to give the reader further understanding of this student population as well as provide a space for these students to share their story. Second, the research coded each interview into three major themes.

# CHAPTER FOUR: VOICES OF SEVEN MUSLIM WOMEN

## INTRODUCTION

In order for the researcher to have data that conveyed the personal experiences of the research subjects, a phenomenological approach was taken. Through personal interviews conducted by the researcher, each subject shared triumphs, struggles, family connections, and movement through personal, religious, and cultural awareness and development. A collection of stories that depict the journey of each research subject was created. This chapter tells the story of each research subject, as summarized from their interviews.

## INTERVIEW 1: RANIYA

Raniya is a 23-year-old Pakistani American. She started at Midwestern Community College (MCC) part-time as a Post-Secondary Education (PSEO) student while still in high school. Once she graduated from high school, she continued as a full-time student at MCC, pursuing an associate's degree in biology. After graduating, she transferred to a local university to pursue a bachelor's degree in biology. She is passionate about serving others and cares deeply about her work.

Raniya lives with her parents and younger brother. She has two sisters who moved out of the family home when they married. Raniya said education has always been very important in her family. She believes the importance place on education stems from her extended family's lack of formal education. Raniya's grandfather was unable to read and write. Many of her aunts

and uncles dropped out of school around sixth or seventh grade in order to work to support the family. Both of her parents were able to continue in education, as they both understood the value of education to their family and future. Her father worked very hard to gain acceptance into college in the United States. However, his family couldn't afford to send him, so he saved until he was able to come and then worked fast food jobs during the day and took evening classes in pursuit of his degree. Raniya's mother finished her education to be (the equivalent of) a midwife in Pakistan. She was passionate about caring for others, especially those with lack of access to healthcare. Raniya recalls her mom sharing stories about giving polio shots to people all around the city. These stories of her parents' persistence and care for others inspired Raniya in her own education and passion for a career in healthcare.

Raniya recalled when her sisters were preparing to get married, her parents continued to remind them of education, stating, "Just because you're getting married doesn't mean that your education stops." Raniya believes the lack of access to education in Pakistan, especially for married women, is the reason her parents constantly reminded them of the importance of education. Raniya also talked about her family supporting extended family in their education. Her father believes so deeply in the importance of education he not only shows this to his children, but to extended family as well. He often helps her cousins pay for education if they are able to gain admittance to a school.

Raniya knew that pursuing a college education was always an option; however, she never felt pressured to go. Instead, she felt it was an honor. Her pursuit of a healthcare related degree was her first choice. While her parents didn't push her into any specific program, she believes their degree programs and careers influenced her decision. Raniya volunteered at a

hospital while in high school. Once she began college, she moved into a part-time job there and continues to work there while working on her bachelor's degree. She had initially applied to the PSEO program at a local university; however, her older sisters attended MCC and said good things about it. She wanted to work on her general education classes before pursuing a bachelor's program and decided to attend MCC due to location, cost, and family experience with the college.

In addition to her family, Raniya has found support in other places, both at work and school. She called out a couple people at work and school; however, she specifically lit up when talking about a biology professor and communication professor. She mentioned the biology professor would ask her biology questions connected to her future career field (nursing). They would also meet after class to talk about class material and the professor would encourage Raniya to apply for scholarships.

Raniya's communication professor included pictures of women in hijabs in PowerPoint presentations for class. She was impressed that the instructor seemed to be aware of diversity and representing all in class materials, even when the lesson wasn't about diversity. She was thankful for this insight and inclusion in the course, even if subtle, as it helps to normalize people who do not fit into the majority population.

Raniya said college was a big change from high school. She attributed this to her high school having "not a lot of minorities at all, let alone Muslim girls with hijab." In high school, she felt alone, singled out, and not normal. Once in college, she found she wasn't alone. MCC "was very open-minded and I never felt uncomfortable being a Muslim woman wearing a

hijab." Raniya shared that being in a diverse environment helped her find her own voice and become comfortable in social situations:

> I would usually be the only one in most of my classes [in high school]. I mean no one said anything to me, but obviously I felt a little left out or a little different. So I mean no one said anything. I mean, I was never bullied, which is a good thing. But I just felt very shy. I wouldn't really interact with people, wouldn't talk to people unless they came up to me and talked to me and got me involved. In gym class, I'd always be one of the last people picked for teams and stuff like that.
>
> But I changed once I think I was more involved with a lot of minorities that were present at MCC. Then after being involved with them, I realized that it's not a minority thing; it's about how comfortable you are with yourself. And so, I didn't limit myself to just people of different colors and races. I would talk to everybody. And the more I talked to people, the more confidence I had, obviously more people talking to me, and I do the same at work. I'm the only Muslim person there in my entire department – the only Muslim, let alone a person who wears a hijab. But I'm the person who coordinates Secret Santa every year. Know what I mean?

Raniya explained that in high school, she felt offended, singled out, and tried to hide her identity when people asked about her hijab. She said when people asked why she wore a hijab, or if her parents made her, she would give quick short answers, simply saying she wanted to wear it. As she become more comfortable and confident in herself during her time at MCC, she determined if people are asking about it, they are trying to understand. She decided it was better she provide them with accurate information versus they learn about it from what is in the media. She would talk more about why her religion says to cover and talk about modesty:

> Why not give them the correct information, rather than what they're seeing on the media, you know? That's my chance. That's my opportunity. If anything, I should feel blessed that people are comfortable enough to ask me.

She concluded that she believes it was the opportunity to be in a space surrounded by a diverse population that gave her the added confidence in herself.

During her time as a part-time PSEO student, she wasn't involved on campus; however, once she became a full -time MCC student, Raniya started getting more involved in groups and activities. She participated in several groups, including the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Black Student Alliance (BSA), as well as attended events sponsored by the Student Senate. At MCC, student activities, clubs, and organizations had a central hub on campus within the Student Life Department. Raniya said she spent a lot of time there as it felt welcoming. She credits her open-mindedness and self-confidence in her involvement in student organizations and activities, even stating she is more confident in speaking up at work due to her involvement on campus.

The coordinator of Student Life offered her (and other Muslim students) use of a meeting room as a private prayer space when it was available. She said it was common for people to use that space for prayer, as well as specific spot in the back of the library behind a bookshelf. Though there wasn't a designated space for prayer at the school, Raniya said MCC didn't have a major impact on her practicing her religion, stating, "I mean religion is more like a way of life for me, so it's not like it really changed anything." While further reflecting, she said sometimes she felt judged by others, including other Muslims on campus, by her choices and interpretation of the religion. For example,

> Islam is all about modesty, so sometimes I feel like I'm being judged for attending school dances, for example. I'm a very social person and, I mean, I like to have fun and I don't believe that Islam is all about being super-strict and not having fun. I mean, obviously there are limits; obviously there's modesty involved. As long as you stay within those limits, I think it's perfectly fine. So, I know that there were some Muslims who would say, "Oh, well, maybe what you're doing isn't right," kind of a judgment.

Raniya talked about balancing her various identities, specifically American, Pakistani, Muslim, and a female. Rainya stated, "I try my best not to necessarily mix them, but make sure that they don't contradict one another." She continued, "There are things within the Pakistani culture that are very taboo within the Muslim religion, and it's actually kind of funny because the majority of Pakistanis are Muslim — but whatever." Raniya went on to explain, and seemed to almost convince herself, that she leans toward the American culture because of the openness and willingness to accept others' differences; however, she values her Pakistani background. She emphasized that her Muslim identity is above all other aspects of her identity, and she goes to lengths to ensure her actions within her other identities do not conflict with her religion. Raniya believes her education has made her a better Muslim, as it has exposed her to greater diversity and differences in thought; it has also helped her recognize her emotions and her reactions to the world around her.

Raniya described how she has become a mentor to a younger generation of Muslims each Sunday when she teaches Arabic to middle school students. She often finds these students confide in her, talk about their struggles at school, or talk about world events. While their conversations may go off topic for what she should be teaching in the class, she believes supporting and mentoring these young students is critical for them. When going to Islamic School herself, she couldn't recall having a teacher who she could ask these kinds of questions, so she wants to give these students access to information she didn't have:

> It's not even that important if they learn how to read Arabic . . . it's just they understand the basic concepts that I'm trying to get to them: being a good person, having those morals, having that respect. My job is done at the end of the day.

Raniya disclosed that her family lived in a different nearby city for four years, prior to her entering high school. During that time, she struggled showing her faith in the community, chose to not wear hear hijab, and didn't want to be seen with her mother or sister, who continued to wear their hijabs. At the time, she found it embarrassing and tried to brush it off when people asked why her mom and sister wore hijabs. The community had very few Muslims. Raniya would often hear people saying rude things about Muslims; however, she never disclosed she was a Muslim, even brushing off the origin of her name.

According to Raniya, at the time, she was embarrassed by her mom and sister wearing hijabs due to the recent impact of 9/11. She felt that identifying as Muslim during that time automatically associated her and her family with the "bad guys." While she understands it was an unfair lumping together of all Muslim people, it was still happening, and she was trying to avoid having to defend who she was or what she believed or having to explain how she wasn't a bad person like the people on the news. Wearing or not wearing the hijab was a conscious choice to separate herself from that, as "seeing anyone with a hijab, you know without even a doubt they're Muslim."

Once Raniya's family moved to a new city and started high school, she was "still very shy, but … claimed the religion." Then, when Raniya started at MCC, "it's not only that I did claim it, I started associating myself with it, started talking to people about it, becoming more open about it."

Raniya reflected about her transition to wearing the hijab:

> Especially as a Muslim, you have to be careful about your reputation, because it's so distorted [in the press] and because — unfortunately, I know that other people don't worry about their reputation or really worry about how they're looked at. But I feel like

> if you're going to publicly represent Islam — wear hijab — you're going to publicly present it. You also have to make sure that you aren't doing anything that'll insult it. And it's actually funny because when I was first transitioning to wearing it, every time that I would do something that was kind of like against the religion, I would take my hijab off.

Raniya explained that she took off the hijab when doing something that might not reflect Islam in the best light was out of respect for the religion. She never wanted to cause onlookers any doubt in the religion or the people who practice. Even though the "bad" things she did with her friends were minor (spray painting a dumpster, or tossing someone's shoes on the roof), there was a collective decision made in her group of friends to remove their hijabs to disassociate their personal actions from the reputation of the religion.

While Raniya believes her younger self struggled with personal and religious identity, she has settled into being comfortable with who she is. Even if someone questions how it might look for a Muslim woman to do this or that, she pushes forward, knowing herself and feeling comfortable with the boundaries of her religion. While she keeps some parts of her personal life private to those close to her (such as playing the guitar), she laughs a little when she says, "I think it just shows how diverse Muslim women can be. But they're not just in a little box. There can be Muslim women in healthcare who play guitars!" She went on to say that the reputation is "delicate," and while she might engage in things such as playing the guitar, she doesn't want to make this public because it has the potential to reflect poorly on the religion.

**INTERVIEW 2: HODAN**

Hodan is a 26-year-old student currently attending MCC. She graduated high school in spring 2010 and started college that fall. She started her college career taking nursing prerequisites, however, is now studying Early Childhood Education and plans to be a preschool teacher. Hodan identifies as a Somali Muslim. She was born in Somalia, lived in Kenya for a while, and then moved to the United States in 2007 with her parents, eight sisters, and a cousin, whom she calls brother. Her parents returned to Somalia in 2014.

When Hodan arrived in the United States, she started ninth grade but indicated that prior to moving to the United States, her education was sporadic, as there wasn't always money for tuition: "We didn't have education for kids that time, and there are still people who don't have money for any education." After finishing high school, Hodan went to college because she enjoys learning and wanted to pursue a nursing degree. While working on her general education courses and her nursing preparatory classes, Hodan realized she didn't like working with blood. She found a job working at a daycare center and took a break from full-time classes to work: "When I get a paycheck, I forget my school." Her work in the daycare center proved to be valuable in helping her figure out an educational path, even though she felt she had "... wasted a lot of time working." She eventually returned to college, part time, to pursue an Early Education major. She decided to try part-time classes as she has two jobs (at a daycare center and as a Personal Care Attendant) and is married. She shared, "There's a lot of responsibility when you've got husband."

Although her parents are indifferent about whether she works or pursues an education, they want her to be happy and will support whichever decision she makes. Her husband is also

in school and has encouraged Hodan to complete her degree: "He always encouraged me to finish school and education. He's told me he'll support me whatever I decide, so he is happy." Her sisters want her to finish her degree before having kids, which Hodan agrees with, indicating it would be challenging to continue in education with children: "My sisters told me 'Go for it. Don't waste your time. You don't have kids now. By the time you get kids, you will be busy.' Yeah, and that's true!"

Hodan mentioned that none of her family members have attended college, saying her sisters "just want to be housewives." She is respectful of their decisions and knows that it is often the case that women in her culture choose to focus on family versus pursuing their education and a career.

Hodan said she was excited to start college as she is interested in learning. Hodan explained that her first semester at MCC was frustrating. She felt the professors expected her to teach herself the material and found herself overwhelmed and didn't feel supported. She ended up withdrawing from one of her five classes and didn't finish with all A grades. Based on her experience that first semester, Hodan was more thoughtful about the number of classes she took as she went forward, trying to balance class subjects, and taking only 2-4 classes at a time, depending on the subject area. She eventually found instructors who were supportive in answering her questions and used the Writing Center as well as support from her friends to get through.

When on the MCC campus, she spends the most of her time in the library and Computer Center. She considered being involved in the Muslim Student Association (MSA); however, the time didn't work for her, and she decided against being involved in any other organizations.

In high school, Hodan said she wasn't always allowed time for prayer; however, she hasn't had that problem at MCC. Though there isn't a specific prayer space at MCC, she found space in the library, such as a private study room where she could pray between classes.

Hodan has found that being a Muslim doesn't conflict with school at MCC. She mentioned the challenge is simply making time for everything — praying five times a day, reading the Quran, and going to Mosque. She has found the professors at MCC supportive, allowing her to step out of class to pray and to take religious holidays away from school. While she has attended some classes on Friday, she otherwise holds Friday as a religious day, focusing on prayer and reading Quran.

Hodan believes Muslim women can follow their own path; however, she believes that things in the United States are different from "back home." She mentioned that culturally in Somalia there are mainly two roles: men go to work, and women stay home to care for children, husband, and the home. However, in the United States she sees more Muslim women pursuing an education. She is happy to see that women can pursue their passions here; however, she also understands how it is a significant change for families and may be a hard balance for women trying to manage it all, i.e., education, a career, family, and home:

> And sometimes they go to seek education. Most of them spend their time in the home. But here, I'm a Muslim, and I still worship, and I do everything that my religion told me, and still I like to be part of the community I live with. And I go to school, go work, everything, so I can tell all Muslim people what they value what they want to be.

Based on her experience, Hodan believes more women in her community would pursue education if they had better access to childcare here in the United States. She believes this is a burden that the women of the household carry, particularly for those who have limited access

to local family members to support them in caring for children. Access to affordable and easily accessible childcare would lift a significant burden and allow more Muslim Somali women to pursue education while in the United States: "I think most of the Muslim women aren't in education or they're not getting more education because they don't have babysitters at home. They start watching their kids." Hodan also emphasized seeing more Muslim instructors would benefit the community. While other instructors may try to be supportive and understanding, having role models from within the community would be additionally helpful in encouraging Muslim children to attend college. Hodan emphasized that one of the reasons she continues to pursue her education is to be a role model for her future children.

**INTERVIEW 3: AMINA**

Amina is a 23-year-old American. She identifies as American, Latina, and Muslim. Amina started at MCC in Fall 2012 and was there through 2016. When she finished her general education, Amina transferred to a local university to continue her education.

Amina grew up living with her mom, with her grandma, uncles, and cousins nearby. She identifies as an only child, however, does have five half siblings on her dad's side.

Growing up, Amina's mom emphasized the importance of education. Her family in the United States stopped their education after high school or GED, yet Amina's mom made sure education was a priority for Amina:

> So, I mean my mom definitely did, and still does, want me to have a secondary education so that I don't have to struggle like they did. Yeah, education is definitely something that they told us is important if you want to, you know, make good money, not have to struggle. They definitely talked about that a lot to us.

She felt there was some pressure to be the one in her family who broke the cycle, the one who would go on to complete a college degree. While it was never said aloud, Amina felt it was implied that she attend college; that she didn't really have a choice.

Amina was born on the east coast and attended a Montessori school until she moved to the Midwest with her family. She skipped Kindergarten and moved right into first grade. After 4 years, the family moved to a new community that Amina described as the suburbs. While it had a nice school system, she recalled she "hated it." In middle school, Amina started covering her hair; however, she quickly became the target of teasing, questions, and harassment. Wearing her hijab only lasted about a year: "I wanted to follow my faith, and follow what I believed in, but it was just like no one — no one understood me."

During the time that Amina did not wear her hijab, her mom was initially frustrated with her decision. Yet, Amina stressed that neither of her parents are practicing Muslims; she was taught the religion and practices by her grandmother and great grandmother. Amina felt her mom didn't have a place to tell her to cover if she didn't herself. Amina also mentioned that it seemed to be common for Muslim girls to wear a hijab for a while and then not wear it, or to wear it in front of family members and then change clothes and not wear it when not around family.

In high school, Amina tried wearing a hijab again and making time for prayer. However, she recalls being nervous about being caught while praying. She would quickly pray in the hallway and stop mid prayer if she heard someone coming.

When it came time to start college, Amina really wanted to go out of state; however, because of limited family finances, her mom convinced her to stay and attend a community college. There was a community college near her home; however, because of the "bullying that I had went through and just the fact that I felt, community-wise, there wasn't much support for people who look like me and who follow my religion, I decided that I'd rather attend MCC — even though it's farther out. I'd rather go to MCC where there's a more diverse population, and I won't stick out like a sore thumb." Amina said she had mixed feelings about leaving her small group of friends. While she had nothing against them personally, she stated, "I was different and didn't fit in. I just remember every time we would hang out; I would just feel like I did not belong." Being one of only four Muslim students in her high school, Amina was seeking somewhere to attend college where she didn't feel like the odd one out. She wanted to get away from being asked questions about her hijab; "about being a terrorist, and you know,

asking me if I have cancer, if I'm bald…."

Amina believes that one's experiences shape people into who they are and who they become. When she started at MCC, she started wearing a hijab again, and felt she was accepted for who she was. She was finding her faith and religion again, and no one questioned her hijab or faith. She noted, "Spiritually, I felt so much happier and more comfortable."

Amina said there are several people at MCC who made her time there even more enjoyable, beneficial, and welcoming. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) and the Office for Student Leadership and Service were both critical elements in her time at MCC. The faculty and staff involved in each of those organizations provided support and mentorship that was critical to Amina feeling comfortable on campus. The MSA in particular was critical in her identity development. She expressed the MSA made her feel at ease and like she belonged. "I just became more passionate about my identity and my background. I'm like, 'Wow, I don't have to be ashamed.'" Amina eventually became the President of the MCC MSA, led many activities and events during her time in leadership, and started conversations with the MCC President about having a prayer space on campus.

While, overall, she felt safe and comfortable praying on campus, it was awkward and inconvenient to find a space to pray. She would often meet her friends in the library and pray behind a set of bookshelves where people didn't go very often. She said another common spot for prayer was the stairs under the library in a nook next to the soda machines where they could pray without much disruption. Amina concluded that praying at MCC felt different than high school as at MCC she was surrounded by others who also prayed. She wasn't alone. Seeing

other practicing Muslims on the college campus was an important part of making her feel welcome and comfortable.

Based on her experiences wearing a hijab intermittently in middle and high school compared to wearing it full time in college, Amina noted a dramatic difference in how people reacted to both her religion and perceived race. Though she was one of only four Muslim students in her high school, she wasn't the only student of color. In high school, her religion was questioned, yet no one remarked on her race. In college, she was surrounded by a very diverse group of students, both in race and religion. Yet, in this context, it was more often her race that people questioned. Amina noticed in college that people saw her darker skin and assumed she is African American, or they would ask where she was born: "People are just very curious about [my race] or assume what I am." She believes that with the combination of her skin tone and wearing the hijab, people assume she couldn't have been born in the United States.

Amina also mentioned that the current political situation and leadership of the current American president may play a part in people questioning where she was born. The images on the media and how Muslim people, particularly women, are portrayed lead to how some people see her. Amina is hyper-aware of social media and its influence on peoples' perceptions:

> You know, all the things that happen in the media and just how whenever somebody who is presumed to be from my religion has done something wrong, it just reflects poorly on all of us. We all get sort of the bad end of the stick.

Amina questions whether where she lives would make a difference overall. Amina believes that part of being a person of color and woman who wears a hijab makes her an easy

target, even stating, "No matter where I go that there's gonna be that kind of fear of us." Amina also mentioned that while she has experienced some harassment and bullying in her life, she knows others have experienced much worse for how they look. She also acknowledged that being a woman, no matter of which faith or background, that there is often "concern and fear and worry" of harassment.

According to Amina, being a person of color, a woman, and a Muslim, places a heavy burden on her. She shared, "people are just going to say, 'This is how black women act,' or, 'This is how Muslim women act.' I feel like I represent both those groups."

Now, Amina is contemplating her next steps in education. While she is taking a break from her university classes, she has had the opportunity to travel and is exploring applying to schools abroad. She indicated that school has been a huge stressor for her to balance working during the day and taking night classes. While Amina indicated traveling as a Muslim woman has its own challenges, she believes it is worth it for her growth and personal experience.

Amina's wish is that people would just take the time to get to know someone different from themselves; she believes that alone can make a difference:

> I've always said that people of different religions, people of different cultural backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds – I love seeing them get together and get to know each other. I feel like if we did that more often, there would be less fear and ignorance and misunderstandings because that's honestly all it takes.

**INTERVIEW 4: SAMIRA**

Samira is a 19-year-old African American. She started at Midwestern Community College (MCC) in the spring semester after her high school graduation to pursue the first two years of an Elementary Education degree. She hopes to transfer to a local bachelor's degree program once she has her education associate's degree completed. Samira's parents are immigrants from Ethiopia. She and her three siblings were born in the United States. She finds that being the oldest, many family responsibilities fall on her, particularly following her parents' recent divorce.

Samira finds herself adjusting her MCC schedule to accommodate her three siblings' schedules. Samira revealed that she has always taken on a lot of the family duties, even getting a job at the age of 15 to help support the family financially. She disclosed that, while sometimes she feels okay about being responsible and helping the family, occasionally Samira believes she hasn't experienced being a kid. She describes moments she has to herself — those few minutes between classes, activities, or responsibilities — as just "passing time."

Samira says college was always part of her plan. Her dad attended college for an associate's degree; however, he never pushed her to attend. In high school, teachers always talked about the importance of education and didn't talk with Samira about any other options. Her decision to pursue a teaching program simply comes from her heart and passions for education. She wants to give back, make an impact on someone else's life, and "be that influential person to someone as a teacher was to me in school." Samira reflected that she has never had a black teacher, let alone a black, female, Muslim teacher. She wants to be a role model to give students who look like her someone to look up to.

Samira said she recalls her third-grade teacher being a very influential person in her life. She had just moved from the city to the suburbs and found the people she was surrounded by did not look like her or her family. Her teacher was able to give her extra time and support to navigate the new class and surroundings. Samira recalls how it made her feel and she wants to pass that feeling of inclusion and care to others. Samira said that she doesn't currently have a coach or mentor, and she supports her parents versus them supporting her. Her support has always primarily come from her teachers, even referring to them as "motivational leaders."

Samira mentioned that she completed one semester of classes at a university prior to coming to MCC. Her decision to start at a university, because she had to move away from her family, was purposeful. Samira admitted it was an attempt to do something for herself and separate herself from her family responsibilities. Her responsibilities, as well as her personal guilt and her mom's pressure, pulled her back; she moved back into her family home and continued her education at MCC.

When she is on the MCC campus, Samira spends her time in the Student Center for meals or in the outdoor spaces. However, Samira mentioned she doesn't really interact with the campus. She is the person who "goes in and out" and says, "I found myself a path," whereas in high school she felt she needed more institutional support. She believes if she needed help, it would be there, and noted the diversity on campus, including the college's diverse administration — however, she also feels MCC is less personal. Samira made the comparison that in high school she would see the same teachers, counselors, and staff each day; whereas at MCC, she receives emails about services and support, but rarely do the same people greet her on campus, saying "hi," or ask how she is doing.

When reflecting on her experiences as a Muslim American woman, Samira says, "It's a struggle. I feel like you always have eyes just watching you and you always have to prove yourself to someone." She continued with a description of her three primary identities:

> First of all, I'm black, and black people already have, you know, a rough history in America – we all know it. And I am a woman, and even women have a very hard history in America. Then on top of being that, I'm a Muslim. So, I have three stools I have to stand on to be on top. It's just hard because those stools are very wobbly, and I can't stay on straight. It's very hard.

Samira said it is interesting when she has had negative encounters with others, she will wonder if it is because she is a person of color, a woman, or a Muslim. She never knows which part of her is the target. Samira goes on to express that she tries to represent all identities correctly to avoid confirming the stereotypes people have about any of the groups. She wants to represent each properly, yet she wants to be her own person and not simply fit into a mold that others provide or expect. Samira also believes that being a woman is the most important of her three identities and provided this perspective on the history of discrimination in the United States:

> First, they're always degrading women, like very low. And they're degrading black women. And they're degrading Muslim women. So, I feel that the woman thing is first. Being a woman is the first thing for me, and then being Muslim. And then being black and being Muslim — because that's how it was for society. You know, first being a woman was hard. When we can't have jobs, and we can't do this and this. Then the black woman can't do things and, 'Oh, you know, they're not smart. They're not educated.' Then Muslims started coming around and, 'Oh, Muslims can't do this and this and this.' So that's how the world sees you.

In terms of her Muslim identity, Samira takes an approach of being respectful about her faith; however, she doesn't represent the entire faith: "Because I'm just a Muslim. Muslims are

followers of the religion of Islam, but I'm not Islam." Samira said she doesn't always pray the required five times a day and doesn't dress exactly how some others think she should. Samira finds herself caught between wanting to follow the religion yet worrying about how others will perceive her. She revealed that sometimes she is nervous and fearful about dressing this way and praying at school; however, she also believes she should be practicing religion for herself and not care what others think.

Faculty at MCC are supportive of Samira, understanding her need to take religious holidays off from class and allowing her to make up work. In class, Samira feels the professors are supportive and open-minded. Samira attributes a feeling of love on campus to the diverse population. While Samira said she experienced racism and bullying in elementary school and recently on social media, she hasn't experienced anything negative at MCC. She said there are always the general things posted on social media that are full of hate; however, she has also received direct messages from strangers, typically about her Somali culture or Islam. She has also experienced when walking down the street or shopping that people will make a distinct face and quickly avoid her. Samira said that while this targeting happened while President Obama was in office, she has noticed people have become bolder under our current president, believing they can get away with more.

**INTERVIEW 5: SAHRA**

Sahra is a 26-year-old Somali American currently taking classes at MCC. She graduated high school in 2010 and started taking full-time college classes at MCC the following semester. Sahra is taking classes to finish her general education and liberal arts degree, however, is interested in Elementary Education as a future major and career. Sahra was born in Somalia and speaks three languages: Somali, Arabic, and English. She moved to the United States with her mom and eight siblings when the war in Somalia was impacting her family.

About two years after starting at MCC, Sahra married. She now has two kids and is pregnant with her third. Sahra met her husband at MCC while he was finishing a certificate program. When she married, she reduced her course load to a part-time load of 2-3 classes at a time and taking a semester here and there away from classes to focus on taking care of her family. Sahra started her college career taking pre-requisites for a medical career, however found it too much to balance with the demands of her courses and family: "When you have little children, little kids at home, and then there's not a lot of support, it's hard to go in the medical field."

Sahra said she went to college right after high school because that was the expectation of her high school teachers and counselors. She said it was always talked about as there wasn't another option. Sahra's brother has also attended MCC, so the transition to college wasn't challenging: "It was already in my mind to continue education, and then while he was attending here, it was easy for me to get here and start right away." Sahra's parents are supportive of her attending college, though she worries they see her struggle with the balance: "They feel good about it even though they didn't have the opportunity to go to college and stuff. But they still

see me struggle." Sahra emphasized that her belief in education comes from her family back home in Somalia. While neither of her parents had the opportunity to pursue much education, she has family members who were successful doctors, teachers, and engineers: Education is "the backbone of the family. But my dad, he didn't get the opportunity to do it."

Sahra further explains that while she believes "Somali women have more freedom than maybe some other Muslim countries," that "back home" education wasn't as valued for women as for men and might contribute to Somali women in the United States not continuing with their education:

> Yeah, yeah, yeah. It is important. Like back home, some families, they used to believe that like education is just for boys and not for girls. So maybe they have that mentality, 'Oh, the ladies are for the home, not for education or work.' Some of them believe that and also responsibility-wise. For all Muslim women, if you are married, just the husband is responsible for paying rent, buying cars, everything. He is, like you say, the breadwinner in the house. So, a lot of them don't try their best to give half – 50/50 – so maybe that's also what puts them back.

While Sahra said this practice is very common within her Somali culture, she believes "It's religious."

In her first semester, Sahra enrolled in four classes, however ended up dropping one in the first three weeks. She felt the workload was too much and admitted she kind of panicked: "Sometimes when you're taking a lot of classes and there's too much pressure and there's homework from here, tests from there, and things where you would say, 'Oh, I can't even continue going to college.'" Sahra struggles with believing she should continue in her education, stating, "Money goes, but education never goes away," as well as feeling the struggle of balancing school and family, "And that's what happens to me most of the time when I say, 'Oh, you have kids. You have this and that responsibility.'"

Sahra is unsure if she will take time away from school when her baby is born. She is leaning toward wanting to return, however sounded hesitant on the timing. Sahra suggested it would really depend on the support she receives, especially in taking care of her children. She said her husband works full time, over 10 hours per day at least four days a week, to support the family. After his commute home in the evenings, Sahra attends evening classes to make progress toward her degree; however, she admitted this is a struggle: "Sometimes you just want to work on a paper, and they're all crying. You just wait for it, like two hours, so that they're asleep. Then do it that way." She is hesitant about taking her kids to daycare, as she has a hard time trusting other people with her kids. For a while, Sahra had a cousin help care for her kids while she was in class, however that arrangement wasn't sustainable long term.

Sahra said she doesn't have a lot of support outside of her husband and a couple family members. She has a few friends who attended college; however, they either stopped out or are already graduated and moved on in their education or career. She feels those who continue are either single and have no kids or husband to care for, or they have more support from family to take care of the children. Sahra admitted that some people in her life had discouraged her from continuing in college: "Mostly to discourage you people would say, 'Oh, now you have kids. You can't continue,' or, 'You can't work.' Things like that." Sahra encourages her single friends to continue in school, although many have dropped out. She doesn't understand why they wouldn't pursue education when they have the opportunity to.

When on the MCC campus, Sahra mostly goes from home to school and back home. When she was taking more classes, she would study in the Computer Center; however, when

she was taking only one class at a time, she did most of her studying at home. Sahra attended a couple MSA meetings; however, she felt she didn't have time to commit to another thing.

Based on her experiences, Sahra said there wasn't really a particular space for prayer on campus. When she needs to pray, she locates a quiet space away from people — usually in the hallway behind the steps in the library building, in a quiet, empty classroom, or in the library behind the bookshelves. Sahra believes the library is a popular prayer spot as it is already quiet, and many students spend time there to study quietly. Sahra said she never let the lack of private space deter her from praying: "It depends on me.... I don't like to miss a prayer, so I would just go whenever space is available." When she is in class, Sahra lets the instructor know about prayer time. She has found the MCC instructors to be accommodating for prayer times, as well as for Eid and fasting times. She mentioned this was very different from when she was in high school, however indicated it was because high school students may not know how to manage their time, and college students are adults and expected to manage it better.

As far as being a Muslim American woman, Sahra stated, "I think it's hard. Yeah, because you look different, and you dress different, and you value different things than the other people or society. So, there are always obstacles in front of you." Sahra recalled that in high school, she was asked why she covered her hair, and many people asked if she had hair, assuming she wore a hijab because she didn't have hair. While she hasn't had that experience at MCC, she said she must be mindful about what different career opportunities might entail. For example, she explained some of her hesitation about going into a medical field is because of her religious background: "In Islam, you're not allowed to touch men who are not your husband or brother or father — family. Otherwise, you have to stay away, but when you're in America or

working with people, it's easy and expected to touch people." Sahra asserted that she wanted others to understand that while there are rules within the religion that limited certain things, Muslim women are not limited in what they can and should do:

> I want people to know that clothing does not limit your education or knowledge. And also, in a workplace the clothing does not limit your ability to do work. And who you are, like if you're an immigrant or someone from somewhere else like a Muslim from another country, it is not different from whoever is working here. Maybe like a little bit of a language barrier, but — I'm here to work and support myself.

Sahra said that while Somali women are strong, there are still struggles in pursuing an education:

> I believe that Somali women are strong women, and most of the time when there is school, a lot of them will graduate and try new things and learn new things. But when they get married and they have a family, sometimes they don't have stable households and maybe [the woman] is a single mother with kids, and she's struggling raising these kids and supporting them. That's what maybe puts her back.

While she understands this struggle, Sahra believes education can be part of the solution: "Yeah, but as a community, I think we need to educate ourselves more." She asserts that if husbands and family members support women in attending school, "the community won't push you back if you're trying your best." Sahra said education is one of the biggest obstacles for Somali women. While these women might attempt school, there just isn't the support, and women end up working and taking care of children: "I believe some of them just believe in working and not going to school. That's number one.... And I heard a lot of people, they don't believe that knowledge is important."

On the other hand, Sahra said that she has experienced pressure, even from her Muslim peers, to do things differently, away from what she believes Islam stands for:

> It's common to have peer pressure when they will tell you, 'Oh, you don't have to worry about wearing a hijab or praying or things like that. Just go with the flow.' Yeah, even in high school, I used to have Somali friends. They told me, 'Oh, let's put jeans on,' and doing things like that.... Yeah, that's not for me.

Sahra emphasized "I don't like to be influenced by others." She feels a strong foundation in her religion, feels her culture is important, and has tried to stick to it, even when those around her didn't. Yet, with all of this, she believes the things that have limited her the most have been the language barrier, time, and her own fear of the unknown. Sahra indicated that she will face that fear, "when I get enough support — like babysitting for my kids — and then I'll continue and see if that's true or not."

**INTERVIEW 6: YASMIN**

Yasmin is a 19-year-old white Middle Eastern student, currently taking full-time classes at MCC. She was born and raised in Syria. She moved to the United States with two of her four siblings and her parents.

When the war broke out in Syria, her father came to the United States as a tourist, and then applied for asylum. He was approved and then applied for his family to join him as asylum seekers. The process for the rest of the family took three years. While it was a very difficult and long process, Yasmin knows it could be worse "I know one family who applied when my father applied, and they are still working on their papers to bring their kids here."

Yasmin, two of her siblings, and her mother moved around Syria for about a year, living with extended family to stay safe: "It all started when the war started in Syria. It was really dangerous to stay there for us." Yasmin's two older sisters are married and decided to stay in Syria. Eventually, they decided they needed to leave, and they moved to Egypt and then Turkey until her father was able to get approval for the entire family to come to the United States. She has only been in the country for one year.

In Syria, Yasmin attended public school through the tenth grade, and then did her best to continue her studies even as the family moved around. In Turkey, she was required to study and teach herself the material, as there was not a school that taught in a language she knew. She balanced a self-education model of learning with taking care of her mother, who battled many health problems, especially while they were in Turkey and had no available medical care. When she arrived in the United States, she researched local colleges and decided on MCC almost right away. Her initial plans were to follow a general education path and transfer once

she decided what to major in; however, Yasmin decided quickly that she wanted to pursue a medical degree, with specific interest in becoming an emergency room doctor.

Yasmin started classes at MCC taking eleven credits during a summer term. It was Ramadan, the weather was hotter than she was used to, and she was nervous. These features combined made it a challenging transition: "And I was so new.... I used to come on a bus, and I used to be really nervous about taking the bus because I didn't know nothing, you know? I was so scared of getting lost." Yasmin emphasized that she became more comfortable and eventually really enjoying being on campus during the summer: "After a while, it started to be fun. I started to meet new people on the bus and have conversations." She was able to use the time over the summer to get used to her new environment, both a new country and new school system, and all of the things both of those entail:

> It gave me a lot of experience, and it gave me some time for me to get used to the new language. It was really hard for me to understand what other people were saying. The different accents, the different ways of pronouncing stuff. I really have my own accent already.

Yasmin emphasized education was something she always wanted to pursue, even though her home country of Syria didn't always make education a priority. She loves learning and always wanted to attend college. Her parents, particularly her father, has always emphasized the importance of education, even though they were not able to attend college:

> They were always concerned about — school was always first for them. And especially my dad, he was always concerned about our school, about other skills that we need to learn — about English, about computers, about anything. I mean, he was always doing his best to give us the opportunities to have more skills than the skills that we already have. So yeah, they were so supportive of me, so I was never thinking about stopping my education at some point. I always wanted to go to the university and have a degree, then have a master's [degree] and a good career.

Yasmin went on to explain that getting married and having children was not a reason to stop education: "Even if, for example, even if you get married in my family, you still have to finish your university and get your degree, no matter if you get pregnant or if you have your kids." Her father's support of education was unshaken throughout what the family has gone through and experienced. If anything, the experiences have made his commitment stronger: "My dad always told me that he wanted to complete his higher education, but he was not able to do that because he had to work; he had to earn some money and be settled, so he was not able to complete his education." He checks in with Yasmin daily and is often more nervous about her exams than she is:

> When I have a final, he's more concerned than I am. He really can't sleep during the night. I'm okay, really. I'm competent. Don't worry. And I mean when I wake up, he gives me chocolate, nuts, and almonds and says stuff like 'Concentrate and don't be nervous.' I'm not, okay? I'm not nervous. So yeah, he's – he's really supportive of me and whatever I need from my school, he just goes and provides it, as soon as I want it.

Yasmin's mom, who wasn't able to complete high school, is also very supportive, just in a different way than her father: "My mom's really supportive, too. I mean, she takes care of me. I mean, I don't have to do anything at home. I don't have to do my laundry or even prepare my meals. She always does that for me. She's awesome."

Yasmin believes that her parents support her and her siblings' education so passionately because they couldn't finish their own education: "I feel they support us because they did not have the chance to find someone to support them."

Yasmin reflected on her first semester at MCC first stating, "It was obviously scary. I was so different in many ways." She continued:

> The way I look, the way I speak, the way I understand others. I mean, my head scarf was like – I felt like everyone was staring at me at some point, and this made me uncomfortable. I mean, people really literally were staring at me for a long time. And I really don't like that, because it made me feel unsafe, you know what I mean?

Yasmin said her fear of others comes from the time in Syria, feeling scared all the time, and not knowing whom to trust:

> It's really hard feeling to be scared for a long time. And in Syria, you always need — every day, you need to be scared — every moment of your life. Then this feeling is gonna be a part of your life. But when I left Syria and when I came here, I really kept telling myself that I really don't want to feel that way again. And I really hope that one day I can help someone not to feel that way, because it's really the worst way ever to feel. It's about the worst feeling ever.

She continued: "I really don't like to be scared. So yeah, it's really — it's really a hard kind of life to be scared every day, every moment of your life." Yasmin finds that she also must be aware of what she is wearing. Even going to the grocery store, she believes people will judge Islam based on how she presents herself:

> When you go through the grocery store… I don't know. People staring at you maybe or meeting people being too nice to you, or people just looking at you for no reason. Sometimes as a Muslim, sometimes people will look at you like, 'Okay, why do you wear it like that?' and stuff like that. I mean we will be judged, which I really hate, so I really like to dress good everywhere I go.

Yasmin indicated the strange looks no longer bother her, stating, "I stare back," but it took time for her to get used to them. With her father's encouraging "You'll be fine," she eventually felt safe and "met a lot of good people." She mentioned having "conversations with others who were really curious about me and why — where did I come from — about my accent, about my English, and stuff like that." These conversations helped her become more

confident, start to trust others, and even enjoy the conversations at times: "I mean I really don't mind questions and stuff like that as long as everyone has respect for others." However, it was challenging for her at first to understand accents and words that were not familiar. Yasmin also mentioned her own feelings of embarrassment: "They might tell a joke that I would not understand. And I will be embarrassed because of that or that I might say something that they will misunderstand."

Based on her experiences, Yasmin is comfortable standing up for herself; however, she does occasionally come into situations where it is harder to ignore the stereotyping that happens to her and her family:

> Three weeks ago, I was driving, and I was really close to my house. While I was driving, there was a guy in a car. He was going the opposite way and he said a bad word to me. Even though I was not able even to see his face, he just said it and left. I felt bad.
>
> So, this is something that I really can't get over easily. It just leaves something in my heart and this – this is one of the things that makes me feel uncomfortable with new people, that I really don't know how they think about me inside of their hearts.

Yasmin says that, while there are occasional direct attacks on her or her family, there are more frequent micro-aggressions that people are likely often unaware of: "People keep telling me, 'You're really nice' — am I supposed to not be nice?" Yasmin has found people assume she or her family members are violent, and as a woman she is oppressed because she wears a headscarf: "I was never forced to wear these — I really wear what I want to. I mean, my family is the most supportive thing in my life." Yasmin reminds herself that there are "bad people" everywhere, in every faith and of every background; however, she doesn't understand why people have to assume that Muslim people as a whole are bad. Yasmin has also had people

ask her if she is American. Initially she would reply that she isn't; recently, however, has simply not answered the question when asked.

While she has experienced these uncomfortable encounters off campus, Yasmin finds the MCC campus to be a safe place: "I never feel unsafe over here... I really feel safe, respected by others." When she's on campus, Yasmin spends a lot of time at the library. She finds it comfortable, feels safe, and she has friends who also hang out there. Other places on campus where Yasmin spends time include a study space near the Chemistry lab, and outdoors when the weather is nice enough. She mentioned that many students also enjoy being in the Student Center and indicated that she would like to spend time on campus, if she had friends who would go with her. She wants to be more outgoing and do things around campus but wants someone to do things with. She emphasized she is looking into becoming more involved on campus through clubs, such as the Muslim Student Association and Badminton Club, but currently doesn't have time because of her heavy course load.

MCC has a lot of support for students, from Yasmin's experience. She has an academic advisor she visits with every month or two to go over classes, report on her progress, and ask questions she may have about professors and classes. When she struggles in a specific class, she also finds the instructors very helpful. She specifically mentioned a biology teacher who became her mentor:

> Last semester I had my mentor who is my biology teacher, and I used to go to her every time I feel depressed about my class or even about my plans for the future, and she was really nice. I mean she was really understanding, and she kind of knew exactly what I was going through. I felt really depressed and like stressed because I felt like I can do better — that I'm able to do better. But she said, "It will take time. It will come with time."

In her MCC classes, Yasmin finds that she is often expected to represent and help explain topics related to Islam. In these contexts, it doesn't bother her, as she believes people are genuinely interested and curious. She feels honored to be trusted sharing this information with those around her: "I appreciate that everyone is confident about — and has confidence in me. I'll speak out and explain what's going on. It means a lot to me." She indicated that it isn't just that she knows about the topic, but that she lives it every day: "It's having feelings, emotion, and so much stuff to describe about it."

Yasmin said she feels supported everywhere on campus but wishes there was a better space for prayer. She said having a dedicated prayer space, including spaces to wash hands, face, and hair would be very appreciated. Currently, Yasmin uses a space under the library stairs, next to the soda machines, to pray; however, Yasmin emphasized that the space is less than ideal for a few reasons. The space under the library stairs isn't always quiet, it is small, and there isn't a space for washing. She would prefer a quiet, reflective space on campus that replicates the feeling of a mosque: "I would love to have space — we call it mosque. Having a small mosque on campus would be really nice." Yasmin said there have been times she is late for class as she has had to wait for the space to become open, as other Muslim students use the space for prayer as well. While her teachers have been understanding, she still feels bad about walking into class after it has started: "But the second time when I was late, I just went to him and talked to him, told him 'this is my problem. This is what's going on.' And he said, 'that's absolutely fine. You're praying; come [in].' He was really understanding."

From her experiences, Yasmin has found being a Muslim in the United States means she represents the religion of Islam. She wishes people would understand, "I am not perfect, but

Islam is perfect. As a religion, it is perfect. But we are human — we make mistakes." Yasmin believes that media portrayals have a lot to do with how Muslim people are misunderstood. There is such a focus on negative events and blaming the Muslim religion: "We never say that Christians had made a bad thing anywhere, or a Jewish person, or any kind of religion, because really no one judges other religions. So why Islam?"

Yasmin indicated that because of this, she is more aware of her actions and that how they are perceived might reflect on Islam: "This makes me even more restrictive about what I do and what I want to do. If I know that all people are watching me and will judge my religion for everything I do. This makes me really uncomfortable about anything." She noted, "Sometimes I really want to do something fun, crazy…. But, what if they saw me? I mean, what if I miss doing something at work? They will say, 'All Muslims are like that.'" Yasmin pointed out that as a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf, if she behaves in a certain way, it may impact the reputation of all Muslim women. Someone who observed her may assume that she was acting that way because of Islam. Yasmin continues to be aware of how others might perceive Islam through her actions and chooses to take the high road, "I like to be a nice person because this shows what kind of beliefs I do have: being a nice person, being a peaceful person, and always wanting to be the better person." She believes that if her personality comes across as a strong Muslim woman, that this will impact how others see her religion and others who practice:

> Being a strong Muslim personality could have a really huge impact [on] how people look at Islam, you know? … My personality should — How do you say it? — reflect what Islam means, you know? But when you do something that's a tiny bit wrong, a ripple just takes it to Islam? No! I mean, I'm a human. Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes it

makes me feel that I'm just being too hard on myself not to make any mistakes, but I'm just doing my best.

Her view on being a Muslim-American woman is that she needs to be strong: "to be a Muslim-American woman over here, you really need to be strong, able to speak out for yourself, and very good at having conversations with others." Yasmin believes she has become a stronger and more open person since moving to the United States. By responding to the questions she receives from curious people, and generally being a social person has allowed her to open up about her background and faith.

Yasmin asserted that in Turkey, her identity was about her nationality, and in Egypt she blended in, but that "over here it's really challenging. People are not judging me because of my nationality or because of anything, because of my personality. They are judging me because of my religion, which is [only] because of my head scarf. Everyone is able to see what religion I have." She pointed out that other religions aren't as visible with limited external identifying features, but that wearing a headscarf makes her an easy target: "It's really obvious that I am a Muslim." Yasmin explains that, for her, wearing the headscarf should give others an opportunity to know her as a person, not judge her based on her appearance. Yet, she has found that in the United States she is judged because she wears the scarf: "They are looking at my religion more than looking at me."

With everything going on in her life, Yasmin finds that balancing family obligations is the most challenging. She often feels pulled to take on more work and responsibilities at home, as her parents do not have strong English language skills: "Whatever appointments they have, whatever meetings they have, I should be there to translate, fill out forms. Even at home, we

have a lot of paperwork to do, and I have to do it." While she asserts that her family doesn't push her to help with these things, she feels a responsibility to prioritize these family needs. She doesn't want the family to be in trouble or miss a deadline on paperwork or an appointment just because she has an exam to study for. While Yasmin is drawn to help and enjoys helping her family; "It is mentally stressful, too."

Yasmin is confident that small changes can make a big difference. She remains open to dialog and conversation about her background and faith, as long as people remain respectful. She insists these small interactions are what can change the world:

> Yeah, the reason that I want to go to medical school and be a doctor is because I'll be able to have the power to make even a tiny, small change in this world. I feel like conversation from this kind can make changes. I mean, if I start with a little, tiny change, other people will do the same. And maybe if I was able to convince one person, this one person will be able to convince other persons, and we can figure out solutions to all these problems that we are having currently. Yeah, it's just taking small steps, and hopefully we'll have a big change.

Yasmin mentioned several times that her religion has made her a stronger person. She talked about where that strength comes from:

> What makes me strong with my religion? What makes me really strong is that … How can I say it? … In Islam, women are very valuable persons who should be treated in a nice way. I mean, men are always required to be nice to them, give them all of their requirements, do everything they need, and it's really, really — it's a big sin when you treat a woman in a bad way. And having this kind of appreciation in my religion, it makes me really strong.
>
> I mean if you've been oppressed in any way, you speak out about it; do not let it go. And if you see anything bad, I'm required to speak out about it. If I saw something wrong, I'll be sinning for being silent about it. I'm not supposed to do that. Feeling that my religion is supporting me in any kind of decision that I make, it is the right decision to make. Yeah, this makes me feel really strong just to say that and not to be afraid of anything as long as I know that I'm doing the right thing for me and to others around me, and that [my actions are bringing] no harm to anyone.

**INTERVIEW 7: LINA**

Lina is a 20-year-old African American student at MCC. She is excited to be in her last semester as a Communications major and transferring to a local four-year school to pursue a bachelor's degree in Marketing Communications. Her goal is to continue into a master's degree program for Marketing. Lina, the eldest of five kids, was born in the United States; however, her parents are immigrants from Somali. Lina grew up in a Midwestern state surrounded by her family, including aunts, uncles, and grandparents. With everyone so close, she was able to learn the language, culture, and traditions of Somalia.

While her parents both attended a few college classes at a community college, she considers herself a first-generation college student as neither of her parents were able to finish a degree. Lina's father owns his own local business, and her mother is a stay-at-home mom as well as a student at a local community college: "I kind of push her to do that too, because sometimes she thinks that she can't do it. But, you know, I help her, and she does very well in school. Education is kind of the priority for us." Lina also defines her parents as her role models: "their morals and values, kind of rubbed off on me, and I look up to them."

Lina's education in the United States started at a Muslim private school. She was surrounded by people who looked more like her than those who didn't. She attended the private school until her middle school years when her family moved to Oman. When she first moved to Oman, she didn't know any Arabic. Her family faced challenges there, including the school kids liking people from America, but hating Somalis: "I was that person in the middle; I was the person from Somali parents — I'm a Somali person, but I'm also an American."

Right before starting high school, her family moved back to the United States. For her first year of high school, she attended a public school, which was a terrifying experience for her: "It was scary, to say the least, because I didn't know how to act around people who were different from me. Yeah, it was very scary. I just stayed to myself because I thought I'd get bullied." While she indicated she wasn't bullied much, "there's always like a few snide comments that you hear." At that time, Lina was trying to figure out who she was, where she fit in, and how it would all come together: "I just didn't know who I was. I was struggling between my identity from a middle school student who was coming from Oman and the person who's here in high school now, the Somali American that I am." Lina was so uncomfortable at the public school, her parents made a decision to find a private school where Lina could focus on her studies, versus being worried about her surroundings. They were able to find a private school where the majority of Lina's class had Somali ancestry. Once she was surrounded by people with a similar background, she was comfortable and began excelling in her education again: "As soon as I got out of that school and into the charter school with people who were the same background as me, it kind of shifted."

Lina's parents made education a priority for the family: "They knew that our success kind of stems from what they wanted for us in coming here and stuff like that. Education is kind of like the big thing, always getting an education, being in school. They always found the best school." Lina believes that, since she's the oldest child, she also must be a caretaker and role model for her siblings. While her parents still help the younger kids, Lina often is the one to help the older siblings with homework, afterschool events, and similar tasks. She has found the responsibility both an honor and nerve racking: "They trust me, should I say? So, they've taken

a step back; they're not holding my hand all the way. They assume that I'm going to my classes, assume that … because I help with the kids' homework that I also do my homework."

Even with her fears during her one year in public high school, Lina was not concerned about coming to MCC. She had minor concerns about "not fitting in," but emphasized it was more about academics, than about her background. She attributes the differences to the maturity that she gained between high school and college, her communication major, and teachers embracing, rather than ignoring, the topic of Islam in the classroom:

> In high school, teachers used to kind of walk around who I was, like I was wearing a hijab and she's not. And when topics about things with Muslims or Islam or anything like that came up, they walked around that. And no, it's there. Please address it and talk to me. Ask me questions. Don't tiptoe around it, you know? Being more direct is always a good thing — and not direct in a disrespectful way, but more, you know, respectful and educational for everybody, because I feel like some people leave high school not knowing that there's a whole other world out there. So, if teachers in high school, and students as well, engaged in how they talk here in college, I think it'd be very good.

During her first semester at MCC, Lina admitted that she isolated herself somewhat; however, "it wasn't a bad isolation; it was more I tried to get my root into the school, trying to actually know my classes, the places. Figuring out school, paying attention to myself so I can get the better grades, you know?" She did have one friend from high school who also attended MCC. They stuck to each other a lot in the first semester. Lina said that in her second semester at MCC, she started meeting people and becoming more social on campus. As she became more involved on campus, she found the Student Center a comfortable place to hang out. She found other Somali students and admitted that previously she didn't really notice anyone else like her as she was so focused on school: "It was just that I was always bustling, hustling, going

to classes and stuff like that, and it was always back to class, to home, to class, to home. I didn't work, so I went home every time. And it was a busy schedule too, my first semester."

In her last two semesters at MCC, Lina found her student employment supervisor and co-workers very supportive. Lina found her conversations with her supervisor full of great advice. She said they each share about their families, traditions, and what they did over the weekend. On her last day of work in that office — because it was the end of the semester and Lina was transferring — they surprised her with a party, including treats and decorations. She is very thankful for her work experience on campus and the people in that office making her feel so welcomed. She feels that her supervisor was a great role model for her and hopes to find another one like her at the university.

Lina describes herself as very disciplined and focused on her education. She typically finishes her homework mid-week. She credits her parents' reminders to "Watch out with your education. Do not slack on your education. Don't play around if you have homework sitting for you at your desk." She said their message about the importance of education was reinforced throughout her life "because everything that they've told me ever since I was a little girl kind of stays with me at this age, and I think it'll stay with me forever." Going to college was always just the next step; it was never an option. She applied to and was accepted by several community colleges as well as universities, however decided on the community college to "take it slowly" and figure out what she wanted to do. At the end of her time at MCC, she is excited about her next step. Through her group of friends at MCC, she has already found friends at the university and started becoming active in those groups, even before officially becoming a student. The groups she joined include the Somali Student Association and the Muslim Student Association.

Lina already feels connected to campus and indicated she is only concerned about her classes and being just another student in the crowd:

> I'm much more comfortable making the transition [to the university]. But also, I'm not sure what it's gonna be like in the class setting. That's kind of the only thing that I'm nervous about, because I knew students, I know the people, I know the connections. It's just a matter of being in a very big class where I'm just another student or a person there, you know? So yeah, I think that's the only thing that worries me. But I think I will do exceptionally well because I feel like I have the connections and the people who have already experienced it to help me through that, and I think that's what — that matters a lot.

Lina defines being a Muslim American woman as "a holistic thing" that is hard to put into words. She finds people in the United States are more passive–aggressive instead of saying things directly to someone's face. Lina recalls that once in a restaurant a friend overheard a non-Muslim customer at a nearby table saying, "Why don't you pull off their hijabs?" She remembers feeling fearful, frustrated, and confused about why someone would want to do that: "I'm wearing this for religious purposes, and you think it's okay to want to pull it off?" Lina acknowledged that encounters like that one actually push her to continue in her education. She believes education is the answer, especially in dealing with her multiple identities: "If anything it kind of pushes me toward education, learning, being a woman, and being a Muslim woman, and a black woman. [My identity has] kind of ceilings on top of ceilings, you know?" Lina is determined and believes in herself to push forward:

> I don't see that as something that can stop me, personally. I want to, you know, push through and actually see what goals I can accomplish that I set for myself. And I don't think that me wearing a hijab or being a Muslim actually stops me from breaking through those ceilings. So, I mean, people might have their opinions, but I can't force you to think something. That's what you think, and I think something else. I definitely think that what the person thinks about themselves is a major thing, and what they

> think that they can become — or come on the other side of all the negativity — just how that plays out.

While she has experienced some negative comments and interactions outside of MCC, she said her time at MCC has been wonderful. Lina does find herself hesitating to talk to groups of people whose membership doesn't include someone who looks like her, and she reported feeling hesitant about sharing treats from her office with nursing students in the classroom next door. She hesitated because they were all white men and women. She didn't want them to think she was weird. Eventually she said to herself, "You're a communication major. You're gonna have to talk in front of people, present stuff... You can do this."

Lina credits people early in her life for her self-confidence. She said, even as a young girl, people believed in her, pushed, and encouraged her toward success. She said,

> I guess it kind of instilled in me that I have to — well, not have to — but I should want success in life. When the world wants you to just stay back. My parents, the education that I've had, my schools, the people who taught in the schools, always stood beside me and demanded — not demanded in a bad way — but more like wanted to see how I would overcome obstacles, and they pushed me, and helped me. And I think that is a part of who I am right now.

Lina gives her religion credit for shaping everything she does. From helping the homeless to being truthful, she says the foundation of Islam has given her solid, guiding principles:

> I think it kind of fuels everything that I do: waking up in the morning — everything, basically. Hygiene, you name it. You know, what I wear, how I speak, my kindness, my enthusiasm, you know? It's like, even in a moment of sadness, it's kind of like it pushes you to be hopeful a little bit. Even if you don't have a strong group of people who are helping you through anything, you kind of can turn to Islam, I think, at least.

One aspect of being a Muslim woman she hasn't figured out completely is how to "intermingle" with boys/men, especially in a school setting. She emphasized that she doesn't date but has "guy friends and stuff like that." She wants to be strict about this part of her faith but is trying to find the balance, especially at school when working on a group project or just being at school activities and events. Lina does make sure her male friends understand her wishes, that they are only friends. She is not ready to date, but when she does, she wants to go about it the right way: "I always have a clear line with my friends who are guys that I'm not about that, and I don't want to have that. I mean, if they have the intentions, they can tell me, and I will tell them. But we will always go about it the right way."

In her education, Lina says being a Muslim has only limited her in one aspect, study abroad. In the teachings of Islam, if women want to travel, they must be with a male family member who can be a "guide, a father figure or something of that kind of thing, or a brother, going with them in their traveling." While Lina believes this practice was intended for times when people traveled in caravans and on camel-back, her family is very strict on her not studying abroad without someone going with her. She hopes her parents will understand, eventually. Lina believes her parents' interpretation and view on the matter may change; however, since she is the oldest child, she isn't sure if she will be able to benefit from their future change of mind.

**CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

Through their interviews, the research participants gave the researcher a glimpse into their lives, including their journeys to and through education, the importance of family support,

and challenges they experienced in cultural and/or religious context. While all identified as Muslim women, the seven participants in this study represent a variety of cultural backgrounds and family structure and support. Through their stories, the importance of support, particularly from their family structure and the educational institution, shines as a critical piece in their decision to attend and persist in college. There is also a common thread of a public versus a private identity within the religious context. These women are very aware of representing Islam and what it means to be a Muslim woman. Consequently, they are willing to sacrifice a piece of their own identity to maintain a public image they see as favorable to perceptions of Islam. Intertwined in it all is the idea of intersectionality, which influences all pieces of these women's lives. While this study focuses on the context of Muslim Women and their journey to and through education, these women shared how multiple identities impact and influence their daily lives. Many times, within the context of their story, it is challenging to identity which part of their identity is influencing a specific part of their decision making or journey.

Through these interviews, the researcher gained significant insight into the journey of these women, common themes regardless of culture or family structure, and what resources are needed to support this group of women going forward.

# CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to better understand the challenges faced and support systems of Muslim women who attend a Midwestern community college. Through individual interviews, the researcher examined the context of each student's life and family, the importance and relationship with education, and the navigation of religious and gender identity. Through a structured interview with open-ended questions, the researcher focused on three aspects of the life experience of the research participants: 1. Personal story/family, 2. Education and decision to attend college, and 3. Navigating intersection of multiple identities while in college. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do the social and religious expectations of the Muslim faith affect Muslim women who pursue higher education?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their initial decision to attend college and/or pursue a career?
    - How do the social and religious expectations affect their ability to continue and complete their college education and/or pursue a career?
    - Which aspect of the individual's personal identity has the most effect on her pursuit of an education?
2. How do community colleges currently help or hinder Muslim women as they pursue an education?
    - What supports for academic aspects, such as appropriate career counseling and opportunities, do community colleges provide?

- What supports for religious aspects, such as prayer and holiday observances, do community colleges provide?
- What supports for social aspects, such as interactions with other Muslim students and interactions with other college students, do community colleges provide?

3. What can, or should, community colleges do to increase, improve, or enhance their support for Muslim women students, as well as any students who vary from the majority religious and social norms?

Once the interviews were complete, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to analyze the interview transcripts. As the data were reviewed, three themes emerged throughout the interviews: 1. Support, 2. Public vs. Private Self, and 3. Intersection of Identity. In this chapter, research question one and two are listed, with supporting quotes from interview participants, followed by an analysis. After reviewing how the research questions are answered, themes arising through the interviews will be further discussed. Quotes taken directly from the interview transcripts are included in the results section under each research question and within the discussion of themes they represent.

Research Question 3, as well as the implications of this study, and recommendations for next steps will conclude the chapter and be further discussed in Chapter Six.

## ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For each of the research questions, selected quotations from the narratives will be presented as evidence addressing the question. The researcher's analysis follows responses from research participants.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1

How do the social and religious expectations of the Muslim faith affect Muslim women who pursue an education?

***Question 1a***

How do the social and religious expectations affect their initial decision to attend college and/or pursue a career?

***Question 1a Results***

Amina

- So, I mean my mom definitely did, and still does, want me to have a secondary education, so that I don't have to struggle like they did. Yeah, education is definitely something that they told us is important if you want to, you know, make good money, not have to struggle. They definitely talked about that a lot to us.

- [The] bullying that I had went through [in high school] and just the fact that I felt, community-wise, there wasn't much support for people who look like me and who follow my religion, I decided that I'd rather attend MCC – even though it's farther out. I'd rather go to MCC where there's a more diverse population, and I won't stick out like a sore thumb

Hodan

- My sisters told me 'Go for it. Don't waste your time. You don't have kids now. By the time you get kids, you will be busy.' Yeah, and that's true.

Lina

- They knew that our success kind of stems from what they wanted for us in coming here and stuff like that. Education is kind of like the big thing, always getting an education, being in school. They always found the best school.

- Their morals and values, kind of rubbed off on me, and I look up to them.

Raniya

- Education – huge – very, very important. Just – and I think it was because my grandparents were illiterate, couldn't read or write."

- A majority of my uncles and aunts dropped out of school seventh – sixth grade? – to help out within the household.

- My parents were the only two that actually continued. They really valued it and especially my dad. And so because — and he worked hard enough to get into school here and it was to the point where his parents couldn't even afford to send him, so he — when he first got here, he used to work at Krispy Kreme, Pizza Hut — I think places like that just to like, you know, during the day and at night he'd take classes and just rotate. So, because he worked so hard, education was our top priority growing up.

Sahra

- [My parents] feel good about it even though they didn't have the opportunity to go to college and stuff. But they still see me struggle.

- But my dad, he didn't get the opportunity to do it.

- In high school they used to talk about college and careers and stuff like thatSo it was already in my mind to continue education.

Samira

- I knew I wanted to go to college just because – my dad actually went to college, so there was that and then I was just – it was always the mentality that like, "Oh, go to college."

Yasmin

- [My parents] were always concerned about – school was always first for them. And especially my dad, he was always concerned about our school, about other skills that we need to learn — about English, about computers, about anything. I mean, he was always doing his best to give us the opportunities to have more skills than the skills that we already have. So yeah, they were so supportive of me, so I was never thinking about stopping my education at some point. I always wanted to go to the university and have a degree, then have a master's [degree] and a good career.

***Question 1a Analysis***

Each of the seven research subjects made direct or indirect statements about their decision to attend college. Social expectations carried by the family to pursue education were brought up consistently among all seven research subjects. They reflected how family members reinforced the importance of education through attending college themselves, making education a priority in the home through time and funding, and/or expressing verbal support or expectations to attend. Six research subjects talked about their pursuit of education stemming

from a parent's value of education, and one talked about a viewpoint of their sister (to attend college before having children). Of those who reported their parents to be influential in their educational journey, four specifically called out their father as the primary supporter. While mothers were mentioned, their role was typically an indirect supporting role, whereas fathers received specific call outs, such as, "They really valued it … especially my dad." Families had a mixed background of parental education levels, though typically fathers had more education than mothers. Additional reasons the research subjects identified for attending college included wanting their children not to struggle as they did, going to school before having children, and going to college because their parents had completed college.

One research subject, Amina, mentioned the diversity at MCC was a factor in her choosing MCC over other institutions, even those closer to her home. She stated, "I'd rather go to MCC where there's a more diverse population, and I won't stick out like a sore thumb." This was the only direct mention of diversity being the primary reason for attendance; however, diversity was mentioned in other contexts. For example, when the research subjects stated that they wanted to be in a place where they didn't stick out. Because all of the research subjects wear hijabs, several stated that they wanted to be in a setting where their dress wouldn't be considered unusual. While there was no perceived connection between the pursuit of education and religious expectations, the research subjects wanted to be comfortable practicing their religion regardless of where they attended school.

While many of the research subjects spoke of various experiences in middle and high school, it is worth noting only one specifically called out the influence K-12 teachers and counselors had on their decision to attend secondary education. Throughout their K-12

education, while the research subjects may have been exposed to a variety of information about continuing their education, it simply may have been overshadowed by family opinion. While it is unclear if this is the case for the research subjects in this study, it would be an excellent point of data for future research.

***Question 1b***

How do the social and religious expectations affect their ability to continue and complete their college education and/or pursue a career?

***Question 1b Results***

Amina

- So, I mean my mom definitely did, and still does, want me to have a [post]secondary education so that I don't have to struggle like they did.

Hodan

- There's a lot of responsibility when you've got husband.
- [My husband] always encouraged me to finish school and education. He's told me he'll support me whatever I decide, so he is happy.

Lina

- Watch out with your education. Do not slack on your education. Don't play around if you have homework sitting for you at your desk. (statements attributed to Lina's parents)

Raniya

- Just because you're getting married doesn't mean that your education stops. (Raniya's father)

Sahra

- Mostly to discourage you people would say, 'Oh, now you have kids. You can't continue,' or, 'You can't work.' Things like that.
- When I get enough support — like babysitting for my kids — and then I'll continue....

Yasmin

- Even if, for example, even if you get married in my family, you still have to finish your university and get your degree, no matter if you get pregnant or if you have your kids.

***Question 1b Analysis***

The respondents' identified areas of support for continuing their education were similar to their initial reasons for attending college, with slight variations about the expectations behind them. It is unclear whether these expectations stem from social norms of the religion, culture, or family dynamic of the research subjects. Four of the seven research subjects continued to focus on family as providing motivation for persisting. Two of these said they would be expected to continue and finish their education, even after marriage and/or children. The two married research subjects, Hodan and Sahra, both cited having a husband and/or children as a potential obstacle to continuing, either from their own perspective or from the comments of a family member. The difference between the individual versus family perspective identifies an interesting dichotomy that could stem from lack of support for married women and women with children, both within the family structure as well as within the academic setting. Looking at these four subjects more closely, the two who suggested family as a barrier to education are both married (one with children), are the two oldest research subjects, and identify as Somali (two of the three Somali subjects). While it is unclear if these additional factors are playing a role in their views on persisting in education while married with a family, it would be an area for future study.

In talking about her educational and religious journey, Amina was one to call out the stark differences between high school and college at MCC. While she wasn't the only one to report the differences of diversity, tolerance, and acceptance, she was the only research subject to specifically highlight the MCC campus environment and how she felt it was a major piece of what kept her at MCC, stating, "Spiritually, I felt so much happier and more

comfortable." Further exploration of how cultural and religious support impacted the research subjects will be explored under research question 1c and research question two.

While one research subject, Samira, didn't address specifically the reason for staying in college, she spoke at length about starting her education at a four-year institution and transferring to MCC after one semester. Her decision to transfer was heavily influenced by unspoken family expectations of being close to home to help support the family, both financially and with day-to-day tasks of running the household and helping with siblings. While Samira moved back home because of perceived pressure from family, it was unclear from the interview if she enrolled at MCC out of her own determination to continue education or with encouragement from her family.

Overwhelmingly, the research subjects leaned on and relied on the wisdom from family as their primary source of support for persisting in education. The researcher was not able to determine if the family support, or lack of support, stemmed from culture, religion, or simply the belief in a pursuit of education.

***Question 1c***

Which aspect of the individual's personal identity has the most effect on her pursuit of an education?

***Question 1c Results***

Amina: Ethnic Heritage

- I think I told you about the Muslim Student Association. I think that's where I started making friends and really started feeling comfortable and really a part of the college when I was part of the MSA because that's where I met a lot of my friends and I just became more passionate about my identity and my background. I'm like, "Wow, I don't have to be ashamed."

Hodan: Family

- I think most of the Muslim women aren't in education or they're not getting more education because they don't have babysitters at home.

- [My husband] always encouraged me to finish school and education. He's told me he'll support me whatever I decide, so he is happy.

- My sisters told me 'Go for it. Don't waste your time. You don't have kids now. By the time you get kids, you will be busy.' Yeah, and that's true.

Lina: Religion

- I think it [religion/Islam] kind of fuels everything that I do waking up in the morning — everything, basically. Hygiene, you name it. You know, what I wear, how I speak, my kindness, my enthusiasm, you know? It's like, even in a moment of sadness, it's kind of like it pushes you to be hopeful a little bit. Even if you don't have a strong group of people who are helping you through anything, you kind of can turn to Islam I think, at least.

- I guess it [religion / Islam]kind of instilled in me that I have to —well, not have to, — but I should want success in life. When the world wants you to just stay back. My parents, the education that I've had, my schools, the people who taught in the schools, always stood beside me and demanded — not demanded in a bad way — but more like wanted to see how I would overcome obstacles, and they pushed me, and helped me. And I think that is a part of who I am right now.

Raniya: Family and Ethnic Heritage

- So, both my parents really valuing an education, so growing up it was huge, and it was education first before anything else.

- [MCC] was very open-minded and I never felt uncomfortable being a Muslim woman wearing a hijab.

Sahra: Family

- When I get enough support — like babysitting for my kids — and then I'll continue … (Sahra stressed this as a significant limiting factor.)

Yasmin: Family

- [My parents] were always concerned about — school was always first for them. And especially my dad, he was always concerned about our school, about other skills that we need to learn — about English, about computers, about anything. I mean, he was always doing his best to give us the opportunities to have more skills than the skills that we already have. So yeah, they were so supportive of me, so I was never thinking about stopping my education at some point. I always wanted to go to the university and have a degree, then have a master's [degree] and a good career.

***Question 1c Analysis***

While all participants found family to be important, six of the seven research participants talked at length about family influence on their educational journey. While four spoke in terms of receiving positive and unwavering support from their family and specifically their fathers, two participants had both positive and negative influence from family. The factors that influence these responses may correlate to marital status, as Hodan and Sahra, the two who indicated a mixed effect, are both married, one with children. Each received verbal encouragement and support from parents, siblings, and husbands to attend college and continue their education, yet both research subjects were still the primary person responsible for household duties, caring for children, and other stereotypical responsibilities of wives and women, in addition to managing a course schedule and, in some cases, a part-time job. Actionable support is lacking in areas of managing the household for both women, and support with childcare for Sahra.

Samira, the research subject who did not indicate a single primary item that impacted her education, discussed the impacts of family; however, they tended to be mixed, with some supporting and some hindering her progress and ability to persist in college. At the time of her interview, she was working through her parents' divorce, was a recent reverse-transfer student to MCC, and was taking care of her siblings and assisting with other household duties for her mother. Her desire to be a role model and mentor for her siblings and future students pushed her to continue her education, while several of the family-related situations caused her stress and potential roadblocks. While this study didn't address the challenges related to student status, such as Samira's reverse-transfer, a few of Samira's comments led the researcher to

believe this in itself was isolating and became an added stressor on her already complicated situation.

Among the interviewees, there was little direct mention of religion or culture specifically in terms of supporting or hindering attending or persisting in college. While some alluded to feeling supported in general (not specific to education) by their faith, Lina was the only research participant to call out religion specifically as something she turns to, can rely on, and is what supports her in everything. Cultural identity, although not identified as significant during the interviews, was a clearly an aspect of the women's complex identities. Hodan, Sahra, and Lina, for example, all identify as Somali, with the first two being born and raised in Somolia. Lina was born in the United States, then lived abroad before returning to the United States. While not the focus of this study, the differences in nationality, culture, and social norms would be an interesting subject for future research.

RESEARCH QUESTION #2:

How do community colleges currently help or hinder Muslim women as they pursue an education?

It is worth noting that having a sense of belonging or sense of safety at MCC was also reported by the research subjects. Though not directly mentioned by the research subjects as the reason they continue in education, it may be one of the reasons they persist at the college. While working through multiple identities, these women seem to have found a sense of belonging at the institution, versus feeling out of place or as an outsider. Regardless if this

inclusiveness was from the campus organizations, visible diversity, or individual faculty or staff members, it is a critical piece.

***Question 2a***

What supports for religious aspects, such as prayer and holiday observances, do community colleges provide?

***Question 2a Results***

Amina

- You know, wherever you can find a spot. But I mean I suppose — you would think because college is a place that you spend a lot of your time, there should be sort of like a designated kind of area or something like that. But I think all of us were just used to that back of the Library behind the bookshelves area. And there was always talk about like how – not necessarily a safe area or something like that, where people need to get behind there for books or things like that. You never know what'll happen. But having your own designated space would be better.

- Because it was either the back of the Library or you just kind of found like a nook or cranny. Actually, there is — by the Library if you go down the stairs, there's two vending machines, and unless it's changed, it probably is still the same. There's two vending machines and there's kind of this little empty space next to it, so people would go over there by those vending machines.

Hodan

- We don't have the specific place, but we used to go to the Library. The rooms, we'd check out.

- When we have Eid come in, we already told our teachers like we cannot come that day because we have our Eid. They told us like, "It's fine." When I asked my teacher, "I want to go pray," they never said, "No." They said, "Okay, you can go."

- Raniyal mean religion is more like a way of life for me, so it's not like it really changed anything. (in relation to not having a designated prayer space)

Sahra

- It depends on me.... I don't like to miss a prayer, so I would just go whenever space is available.

- I used to look for where there's not a lot of people or empty spaces.... Yeah, not really like a classroom. Like the hallway or like behind the stairs.

Samira

- I think it's really supportive. Like we had a holiday recently — Eid al Adha — and I told my teachers I couldn't go to class and like, "It's okay. It's fine."

Yasmin

- I would love to have space — we call it mosque. Having a small mosque on campus would be really nice.

- I think [under the stairs,] it's an acceptable spot. But I mean when men pray, I don't like to pray when they are praying, so I should wait for them. But when they're done, and I go to pray, but sometimes I have classes. So, I'll be waiting for them, I'll be late for my class. So, it would be nice to have a room where it just — a spot to do that.

- But the second time when I was late, I just went to him (faculty member) and talked to him, told him "this is my problem. This is what's going on." And he said, "that's absolutely fine. You're praying; come [in]." He was really understanding. (prayer during class)

***Question 2a Analysis***

Six of the seven research subjects indicated either directly or indirectly that a designated prayer space is needed on the MCC campus. While participants found space to pray on campus — in the Library behind "that one bookshelf," and under the Library steps next to the pop machines — there was variation on how comfortable each participant was using these public spaces. While some suggested they will pray wherever and are comfortable anywhere, others hesitated. Yasmin talked about praying under the stairs; however, because the space is small, and when men are praying in that space, she isn't comfortable praying there. This mean she must decide between waiting for her turn resulting in being late for class or skipping prayer time to be in class on time.

Sahra stated, "It depends on me," when asked about finding a space to pray. It could be assumed she places a higher level of significance on prayer time than she does in being comfortable or finding a private space. From her conversation with the researcher, she did her best to make time for prayer and didn't really think about it being an inconvenience.

As a state institution, MCC observes state recognized holidays, including many traditional Christian holidays. No dates for other religious holidays are officially observed on campus, leaving a significant number of non-Christian students trying to identify appropriate actions to take in observing their religious holidays. Support from faculty and staff on campus was mentioned by the majority of the research subjects. When religious holidays, such as Eid, were approaching, students felt comfortable going to their faculty members to explain the need to miss class. They reported faculty being understanding and their being able to take time for prayer and religious holidays away from class without penalty.

It could be argued from these responses that students have to opt into "outing" themselves as Muslim students. While the students in this study all wore hijabs, not all practicing Muslims chose to do so. Having to ask for prayer time or a day away from class because of religious holiday would require students to be comfortable, confident, and self-assured in their religion and themselves enough to approach a faculty member with this information and request. Further, having to ask permission to miss class for religious observation can also be seen as giving the faculty member inappropriate and unnecessary power over the student. While all research subjects reported support from faculty, if a faculty member said "no," the students would either have to attend class, sacrificing their religious

beliefs, or miss class, going against the faculty member and risking their status and grades in the class.

Overall, direct support from MCC for religious observation, such as holiday observances and prayer, is non-existent. The research subjects in this study exuded confidence and enough perseverance to find spaces to pray and talk with instructors about holidays away from school. Though instructors seem to be supportive of students, the researcher is curious about the dynamics and subsequent repercussions if an instructor would not be supportive. Further, future exploration into those students who want to practice their religion, but who are not confident enough in their own identity to pray in public spaces or talk with a teacher about their religious holiday is needed.

***Question 2b***

What supports for social aspects, such as interactions with other Muslim students and interactions with other college students, do community colleges provide?

***Question 2b Results***

Amina

- I think I told you about the Muslim Student Association. I think that's where I started making friends and really started feeling comfortable and really a part of the college when I was part of the MSA because that's where I met a lot of my friends and I just became more passionate about my identity and my background. I'm like, "Wow, I don't have to be ashamed.

Lina

- Guys usually hang out at the pool table and girls used to hang out in the little sitting area. Sometimes doing both, so yeah, that's what we did.

Raniya

- [MCC] was very open-minded and I never felt uncomfortable being a Muslim woman wearing a hijab.

- I didn't start getting involved until I was a full-time student there after high school...I was really involved in things that went on at the [Student Clubs] area... I know that part of Muslim Student Association and there's also Black Student Alliance that I really liked.

Yasmin

- I really wanted to — I want to be part of clubs and organizations in the campus, so I could be more social... And I really want to be part of the Muslims Club.... I really want to do it, too. I can meet a lot of people there.... A lot of people that I have in common — something common with. This would be nice.

***Question 2b Analysis***

While the diversity of the MCC campus was mentioned at various points during interviews with the research subjects, the MCC Student Center space and campus clubs/organizations, such as the Muslim Student Association and Black Student Alliance, are two places multiple research subjects mentioned feeling comfortable and finding spaces where people looked like them. Those research subjects who mentioned not being active in student organizations or campus clubs — Hodan, Samira, and Sahra — cited not having enough time and had significant outside of school responsibilities taking care of household and family duties.

While the campus provided students with the Student Center as well as the opportunity to create clubs, there was no mention of any formal college-supported activity, space, or group for Muslims students, let alone Muslim American Women. While it is common for institutions to expect students to navigate to locate support systems, clubs, and activities on their own, this places an additional burden on students who are already stressed, nervous, and unsure if they belong. First generation students, women, students of color, and students who didn't find a safe space in high school are already vulnerable. While it was apparent that some of the research subjects in this study were able to navigate this on their own, it would be useful to

define what purposeful interaction and support from a community college might look like for those who are not able to make those connections independently.

Outside of campus clubs and organizations, which are founded, led, and organically grown by students, MCC doesn't have a formal college-sponsored space for identity-specific groups. Spaces where students find people who look like them and feel they belong are critical for student persistence; however, future research could examine if college-sponsored spaces have the same impact as organically grown, student-run organizations or spaces.

## EMERGING THEMES

Three themes emerged consistently throughout the interviews with the research subjects: (1) support, (2) public vs. private self, and (3) intersection of identity and public perception. While the researcher found these themes throughout the answers to the research questions, they started to form some additional findings not initially a focus of the research topic.

### *Theme One: Support*

Early in the research, support quickly emerged as a strong theme in all of the interviews. Two primary types of support emerged as both common and critical in the research subjects' ability and desire to persist: Family Support and Campus Support. While family was a major piece of all research subjects' lives and was consistently mentioned throughout each interview, there was some variance in what support looked like. These differences appeared in various ways, some more impactful in the pursuit of education and development of the research subject.

Family was a consistent theme throughout all interviews. From verbal encouragement to attend college and reminding students to study for exams, to providing financial support and assisting in finding the best schools, all of the research subjects indicated some kind of family support for their education. The three who lived at home in two parent households spoke repeatedly about their continued family support through multiple avenues, such as frequent encouragement and expectations for them to continue their education. These three women expressed that they received support from both parents, however, spoke the most about their father's expectations of them finishing their education. For example, Yasmin's parents always held school as a top priority, "[My parents] were always concerned about — school was always first for them. And especially my dad, he was always concerned about our school, about other skills that we need to learn — about English, about computers, about anything. I mean, he was always doing his best to give us the opportunities to have more skills than the skills that we already have."

While all of the women mentioned receiving support form family, three had additional family responsibilities — Hodan and Sahra, the two married women (one with children), and Samira, who took on significant roles caring for siblings and providing financially for her family. While the husbands seemed to be generally supportive of their wives attending college, this verbal support wasn't backed up with the same actionable support as it was for their non-married peers. Hodan received little support from other female family members, as they all followed the traditional route in her culture, and "just want to be housewives." For Hodan and Sahra, their support from their husbands comes in the form of verbal support; they are expected to continue managing the household. These two are attending MCC part-time (all

others full time) and seemed to indicate a desire and noticeable grit to complete college; however, their comments lacked a certain level of passion when they talked about completing college. The cause of this lack of "passion" is unknown. It may be simply from being tired and overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks they needed to complete.

Campus support, particularly from faculty mentors and student organizations, was mentioned directly or indirectly by each research participant. Through one-on-one interaction with faculty, staff members allowing students to pray in open meeting rooms, and peer support through campus organizations, the research subjects all had some kind of connection to campus, with varying breadth and depth. Several participants also mentioned the feeling of campus being a safe space, noting their high school or general community may not have always felt comfortable, but that the MCC campus was both welcoming and safe.

Support through faculty or staff members was a critical piece to finding acceptance and being comfortable on campus. Samira specifically mentioned, "I did talk to my teachers out of class, and they really made me feel comfortable." However, this campus support came in many forms. Lina's student employment supervisor took an interest in her, and "was really interested in my background and my family and where I came from." Lina took this interest as a kind gesture and felt welcomed into the office she was working in. Support often morphed into mentorship, as Yasmin experienced, "Last semester, I had my mentor who is my biology teacher, and I used to go to her every time I feel depressed about my class or even about my plans for the future.... She was really understanding, and she kind of knew exactly what I was going through."

Feeling safe and welcomed on campus was a critical piece of support as well. Raniya specifically called out the stark difference she experienced between high school. She stated that there were, "not a lot of minorities in high school at all, let alone Muslim girls with hijab" and that MCC "was very open-minded, and [she] never felt uncomfortable being a Muslim woman wearing a hijab." She also was keenly aware of faculty being inclusive to multiple identities in ways others may not notice: "Within our discussions in class, it has nothing to do with Islam, but for example it was a PowerPoint, just pictures of people… some of them would be wearing hijab, and I haven't ever seen that… I just thought that was interesting…. the fact he is putting it up there and not commenting a word on it, it just shows that it shouldn't be a big deal and it's not. I just thought it was very — it was beautiful, so I liked that."

In high school, Amira had similar experiences as Raniya. She was one of four hijab-wearing students and didn't feel she had a place: "I was different and didn't fit in. I just remember that every time we would hang out, I would just feel like I did not belong." To further isolate her, her high school classmates would ask probing questions "about being a terrorist, and you know, asking me if I have cancer, if I'm bald…." When Amira was looking for a college, being comfortable in a diverse environment was important to her. She commented that she decided to attend MCC instead of attending one of multiple colleges closer to her home because of the diversity and safety on campus. Once she started attending, she didn't have to hide or feel targeted due to wearing a hijab: "I just became more passionate about my identity and my background. I'm like, 'Wow, I don't have to be ashamed.'"

These feelings of belonging, campus safety, and diversity speak to a type of support that is difficult to identify and measure, yet the MCC campus seemed to show the research subjects a level of perceived support through the diversity students saw there.

While Hodan, Sahra, and Samira spoke of faculty or staff support from campus, they are also the three research subjects ***not*** involved in campus activities. They all mentioned they could not fit campus activities into their schedule because of their responsibilities caring for family and households. Campus support, then, for these students came in the form of faculty members answering homework questions, supporting them in taking religious holidays from class, and being flexible about prayer times that overlapped class time.

While family seemed to be the primary positive support that encouraged these students to persist, campus support was critical for the students who didn't receive consistent support from family. In the case of this study, those who filled the role of mother, wife, and/or primary caregiver for their household didn't receive enough actionable support from family members for that to be the primary reason for them to persist in education. Other factors, such as campus support, belonging, and self-determination and grit had to fill in the support gap.

***Theme Two: Public vs. Private Self***

Throughout the interviews the researcher noticed, both in verbal and non-verbal reactions, the research subjects were very aware of how they presented themselves to the researcher, how they formed answers to questions, as well as how they presented themselves to the public. This trend also became evident throughout their stories when the research subjects stressed being very aware of representing Islam in public. For these women, their public persona wasn't simply wanting to be seen as religious, faithful, or otherwise "a good

Muslim," it was a deeply engrained awareness that their public self was the personification of Islam.

Women who chose to wear the hijab are easily identified, even if people are not certain what the hijab means or represents. "It's really obvious that I am a Muslim," says Yasmin about wearing her hijab. Their actions, or lack of action, were top of mind in every decision they made, in everything they did. Lina called it out by saying, "I think it kind of fuels everything that I do: waking up in the morning — everything, basically. Hygiene, you name it. You know, what I wear, how I speak, my kindness, my enthusiasm, you know?" Yasmin stated, "They are looking at my religion more than looking at me." She went on to say, "Over here it's really challenging. People are not judging me because of my nationality or because of anything, because of my personality. They are judging me because of my religion, which is [only] because of my headscarf. Everyone is able to see what religion I have."

A couple of the research subjects specifically mentioned as pre-teens they chose to not wear a hijab, or wore it intermittently, depending the context of what they were doing. Raniya mentioned she didn't wear a hijab in public as she feared being associated with the "bad guys" around the time of September 11, 2001. Raniya shared that the reputation of a Muslim women is "delicate":

> Especially as a Muslim, you have to be careful about your reputation because it's so distorted [in the press] and because — unfortunately, I know that other people don't worry about their reputation or really worry about how they're looked at. But I feel like if you're going to publicly represent Islam — wear hijab — you're going to publicly present it. You also have to make sure that you aren't doing anything that'll insult it. And it's actually funny because when I was first transitioning to wearing it, every time that I would do something that was kind of like against the religion, I would take my hijab off.

Yasmin took it a step further, saying,

> Being a strong Muslim personality could have a really huge impact how people look at Islam, you know? My personality should — How do you say it? — reflect what Islam means, you know? But when you do something that's a tiny bit wrong, a ripple just takes it to Islam? No! I mean, I'm a human. Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes it makes me feel that I'm just being too hard on myself not to make any mistakes, but I'm just doing my best.

Choosing to not do something was just as important as deciding to participate in an activity. Though each of the research subjects had seemingly different levels of strictness about the religion and what was right or wrong, collectively there seemed to be an unspoken rule when it came to an activity that may not be perceived as reflecting well on Islam. First, they could participate in the activity privately, such as Raniya playing the guitar in the privacy of her home but not telling anyone that she does. The second option was to do the activity publicly, but not around family members, and, in doing so, they must remove their hijab to disassociate with being Muslim. Amina called this out, saying that it is common for Muslim girls to go through a period of changing clothes and removing the hijab at school or in non-family social situations. A third option was to simply not participate in the activity. As Yasmin described it, "Sometimes I really want to do something fun, crazy.... But what if they saw me? I mean, what if I miss doing something at work? They will say, 'All Muslims are like that.'" Raniya explained it by saying, "Islam is all about modesty, so sometimes I feel like I'm being judged for attending school dances, for example. I'm a very social person and, I mean, I like to have fun, and I don't believe that Islam is all about being super-strict and not having fun. I mean, obviously there are limits; obviously there's modesty involved. As long as you stay within those limits, I think it's perfectly fine."

The research participants simply wanted to blend into their environment; however, as Raniya put it, "Seeing anyone with a hijab, you know without even a doubt they're Muslim." Fitting in at MCC was generally easier than in high school or the general community, as they found other students who identified similarly in religion and/or culture. Amina mentioned that, while she made time for prayer in high school, if she heard someone coming, she would stop and just go on with her day. In college, she became more comfortable, as she was often with others who were also praying.

Although there isn't an official designated space at MCC, it seems the Muslim students have a handful of common spaces where they pray. This group-identified space, while in the open — under stairs and in the library, for example — has become a seemingly safe space, where Muslim students generally feel comfortable and unbothered by passersby.

While the research subjects frequently stated feelings of wanting to fit in or blend in, they wanted to do so while wearing a hijab. This leads the researcher to believe the ideal they are aiming for is more acceptance of women wearing a hijab. They want to normalize it to the point of wearing hijab as being like someone wearing a different color shirt or a different style skirt.

The level of personal awareness and development in both self and religion is significant for all research subjects. The commitment to restrict one's personal activities in public — not out of concern for the public perception of one's self, but instead to protect the reputation of fellow Muslims and entirety of Islam — is extremely noteworthy. While it is clearly not the place of any institution to affect how much Muslim women share about themselves in public, it is important for educators, advisors, and other school personnel to be aware of these dynamics.

As students are developing their self-identity and becoming comfortable in their own identity, Muslim women, and specifically those who wear a hijab, have the added pressure of representing an entire faith group. Participation, or lack of participation, by Muslim women in campus activities and events may be affected by how they believe their religion will be perceived if they actively participate in events and are then judged for this participation.

***Theme Three: Intersection of Identities***

Intersectionality is a theme found woven throughout the interviews, as well as a dynamic that impacts the other two themes. While some of the research subjects were very aware of the impact of identity intersection happening in their everyday lives, it was also clear to the researcher that there was a varying depth of understanding across all research subjects. Some were struggling in areas of their lives and either couldn't articulate the exact reason why or didn't want to say it out loud. Gender, religion, culture, and race were the four primary identities talked about throughout all interviews. Other aspects of identity, such as age, marital status, socioeconomic status, and citizenship/nationality are also very important, however, were not the focus of the interviews and where not brought up consistently by the research subjects.

The research subjects spoke about their religious identity in terms of praying five times a day and wearing a hijab, being more confident in themselves, becoming aware of the visibility of their religious affiliation, and representing their faith (Note: Italics added for emphasis).

Amina

- Me and my friends were talking about this last night. *t sucks too because being a person of color and being a Muslim*, those are both groups that are targeted all the time and scrutinized all the time. *So, if I did something or whatever it is that I did, it wouldn't necessarily reflect badly on Muslims at all; it'd reflect badly on people of my*

***skin color and women of my skin color in particular — like black women***. So yeah, that's always a concern of mine.

- ***If I were to do something really stupid or, you know, people are just going to say, "This is how black women act," or, "This is how Muslim women act," I feel like I represent both those groups***." An opportunity hasn't really come across where I've kind of been worried about inaccurately representing Muslims or black women. I mean —I would say more online is what I sort of think of, "If I post this are people going to think all these other kinds of things?" I mean, I used to sort of think of it and now I just don't really care, because I'm like, "This is what's important to me and this is what I should be talking about."

- I know no matter where I go that there's gonna be that kind of fear of us.

Hodan

- And sometimes they go to seek education. Most of them [Muslim women] spend their time in the home. But here, I'm a Muslim, and I still worship, and I do everything that my religion told me, and still I like to be part of the community I live with. And I go to school, go work, everything.

Lina

- If anything, it kind of pushes me toward education, learning, being a woman, and being a Muslim woman, and a black woman. [My identity has] kind of ceilings on top of ceilings, you know?

- I don't see that as something that can stop me personally. I want to, you know, push through and actually see what goals I can accomplish that I set for myself. And I don't think that me wearing a hijab or being a Muslim actually stops me from breaking through those ceilings, so, I mean, people might have their opinions, but I can't force you to think something. That's what you think, and I think something else. I definitely think that what the person thinks about themselves is a major thing, and what they think that they can become — or come on the other side of all the negativity — just how that plays out.

Raniya

- I try my best not to necessarily mix them, but make sure that they don't contradict one another. There are things within the Pakistani culture that are very taboo within the Muslim religion, and it is actually kind of funny because the majority of Pakistanis are Muslim — but whatever.

- Especially as a Muslim, you have to be careful about your reputation because it's so distorted.

- [Muslim reputation is] "delicate."

Sahra

- I think it's hard. Yeah, because you look different, and you dress different, and you value different things than the other people or society. So, there are always obstacles in front of you.

- I want people to know that clothing does not limit your education or knowledge. And also, in a workplace the clothing does not limit your ability to do work. And who you are, like if you're an immigrant or someone from somewhere else like a Muslim from another country, it is not different from whoever is working here. Maybe like a little bit of a language barrier, but — I'm here to work and support myself.

Samira

- It's a struggle. ***I feel like you always have eyes just watching you and you always have to prove yourself to someone***.

- First of all, I'm black, and black people already have, you know, a rough history in America — we all know it. And I am a woman, and even women have a very hard history in America. Then on top of being that, I'm a Muslim. So, ***I have three stools I have to stand on to be on top. It's just hard because those stools are very wobbly, and I can't stay on straight***. It's very hard.

- First, they're always degrading women, like very low. And they're degrading black women. And they're degrading Muslim women. So, I feel that the woman thing is first. Being a woman is the first thing for me, and then being Muslim. And then being black and being Muslim — because that's how it was for society. You know, first being a woman was hard. When we can't have jobs, and we can't do this and this. Then the black woman can't do things and, "Oh, you know, they're not smart. They're not educated." Then Muslims started coming around and, "Oh, Muslims can't do this and this and this." So that's how the world sees you.

- I feel like I have to prove myself to someone when I see something wrong, I'm just kind of like yikes. I always want to be correct. In front of other people, I want to be proper. I don't want to be a person that falls into the stereotypes that people give those people just because that's not true.

Yasmin

- Sometimes I really want to do something fun, crazy…. But what if they saw me? I mean, what if I miss doing something at work? They will say, "All Muslims are like that."

- This makes me even more restrictive about what I do and what I want to do. If I know that all people are watching me and will judge my religion for everything I do. This makes me really uncomfortable about anything.

- But women had a big role in changing this world and Islam really speaks out loud about it, but yeah, so that's why it just gives me a lot of confidence to say what I think. You know?

Code-switching may be automatic for some of the women in some cases; however, deciding which role to play in public is a very real part of everyday life for the research subjects. Rainiya, for example, even stated that her Pakistani culture and Muslim faith often contradict one another; thus, knowing the space she is in, and the people she will be surrounded by, is critical for her.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Unfamiliar spaces, such as a new college campus, may feel overwhelming and create worry and fear for students exploring higher education. While students in this study typically decide to continue their education due to family support, being unsure if they will find a group of people who they identify with, or who will support them is a valid concern for students. This concern is even more significant for those with limited support from family. All participants said they feel safe and welcomed at MCC, mentioning this is at least partially due to the diversity on the MCC campus as well as support via clubs and organizations, faculty, and staff members. For the research subjects with neutral family support, campus support was critical. Support paired with their personal determination allowed students to persist, though some at a slower pace than others. Quantity and quality of support and their impact on the pace at which students persist through education is an area not covered in this study and would be an area to explore further.

The research subjects found themselves balancing between the two worlds of their public and private selves. Wearing a hijab makes it impossible for these women to blend in to the communities where they live, work, and attend school. While the subject's public self was extremely aware of public perception of Islam and how their personal actions would be connected to the entire Muslim community, their private selves could relax without fear of misrepresenting an entire religion. Growth in self-confidence (around personal or religious themes) was evident when the research subjects were surrounded by other students who identified either culturally or religiously the same as they did.

Now that we have heard the voices of those living this reality, we look to the future to create an authentic space for Muslim Women attending community colleges.

# CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

## INTRODUCTION

Chapter Five addressed the research questions that centered on the respondents and their experiences in community colleges. This chapter will begin with the final research question that centers, instead, on the role of community colleges in helping these women succeed. Following discussion of this role, the chapter will conclude with the broader implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

## RESEARCH QUESTION 3: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

What can, or should, community colleges do to increase, improve, or enhance their support for Muslim women students, as well as any students who vary from the majority religious and social norms?

### ANALYSIS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

As community colleges serve increasingly diverse student populations, it is critical for campuses to not only be aware of the campus demographics, but also adjust services and spaces to accommodate and support various populations of students. From the interviews, four areas came to the forefront.

**First**, community colleges should provide spaces for students who identify in cultural, religious, and gender minorities. As found in the literature review, students are more likely to

remain in college when they are supported and involved on campus. Creating a sense of belonging on campus is a critical piece to student retention. While some connections may happen naturally, having dedicated spaces for students to find others who have the same identity groups as they do provides an open door, versus the student feeling they are having to build the door. Student clubs and organizations are terrific, if they are already in place and active. However, as student run organizations often ebb and flow, having a space on campus that would encompass many identities may help fill the gap. Multicultural Centers, if done correctly, can provide significant support to students from multiple identity groups. These spaces create a critical mass, allowing students to be comfortable, find support, and feel that they belong.

**Second**, campuses need to offer a private space that can be used for prayer. Throughout the interviews, the research participants mentioned praying in the library behind the bookshelves, in study rooms, and under the steps next to the soda machines. While their persistence and dedication is evident, these spaces are not appropriate. Community colleges can show support through providing private spaces for students to pray. Within this point, separate spaces for women and men to pray would best accommodate Muslim students. Additional considerations, such as appropriate flooring, washing stations, and safety would need to be explored.

**Third**, take major religious holidays into consideration when creating a campus calendar. Minimally, important dates such as final exams and commencement would never be scheduled on a religious holiday. Ideally, campus officials would look at the Islamic calendar and match holidays with days off of school. Considering the school breaks throughout the year,

institutions may be able to make small adjustments to breaks, training dates, and other non-school day to better align with holidays. This change would alleviate the stress from students having to ask faculty for permission to miss class for a religious holiday and risk falling behind in classwork.

**Lastly**, community colleges should ensure cultural competence of all employees through continuous training. Starting with new employee onboarding, employees can learn about campus diversity and the unique qualities of various groups of students. Since the demographic breakdown of a community as well as a campus can quickly change, ongoing trainings during staff/faculty workshops, division meetings, and learning days should be provided to ensure the most relevant information is being shared. Campuses should look to community experts to ensure the information is authentic and relevant. For example, a community college campus may work with the campus Muslim Student Association (MSA), as well as a local Mosque to bring in speakers relevant to Islam. While some trainings may be relevant to the entire campus, breakout sessions could be utilized to examine details around things such as financial aid/loans, family support, and prayer times with those working in specific departments.

## ADDRESSING THE STUDY'S LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

While this study gives valuable insight into the journey of Muslim women at community colleges, there are limitations to note. Initially, the researcher encountered challenges in finding interview subjects who met the requirements and were willing to talk about their personal journey. While thirteen Muslim women initially indicated interest in participating in the study, only seven came forward due to the following reasons: eligibility, didn't reply to

schedule a meeting, didn't show for a scheduled meeting, or expressed an unwillingness to answer questions for the study, as in the case of one student who responded, "interesting study, however, too personal for me to share."

Interview locations were the choice of the interview subject to ensure they were comfortable. Interview locations included open library space, private study room in library, campus classroom, and the home of a research subject. Meetings also varied in how many times the researcher and interviewee met, based on the availability of the research subject. Some opted for one longer meeting while others opted for two shorter meetings. Thus, the Delimitations of this study include:

1. All participants attended a single community college in a diverse metropolitan setting.
2. Only seven Muslim women were interviewed.
3. Semi-structured interviews consisted of questions focused on educational journey, support, and experience in the community college attended.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends further exploring the following areas to continue building a collection of data to best support diverse populations of students at community colleges.

(1) **Impact of family versus high school educators in decision making about post high school plans**. In this study, only one research subject directly mentioned K-12 influence on her decision to attend college. Because of the significant influence family played in the lives of the research subjects, investigation into the influence family has versus high school counselors and

teachers could be beneficial in creating support programs, literature, and models to funnel students into the college system.

(2) **Exploring differences in Muslim women within various nationality, culture, and social norms.** The Muslim faith spans many cultures, nationalities, and other variables in identity that this study could not account for. A deeper focus on identity groups within the larger group of "Muslim Women" would give further insight on unique qualities and support needs of specific groups.

(3) **Impact of college-run spaces vs. student-organized spaces for diverse populations of students.** The importance of identity, belonging, and comfort has been stressed repeatedly in previous research that indicates students are more successful when they feel a sense of belonging and are part of their campus community. The voices in this study, too, have made it clear that, even those who value diverse spaces and experiences, also enjoy and value being surrounded by students with similar identities. Thus, it seems important that further investigation examine the types and uses of space and provide critical insight into how college campuses identify and organize these spaces.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The role of the community college in support Muslim Women is significant. Four major implications came from this study. Those four recommendations, (1. Providing spaces for students who identify in the cultural, religious, and gender minorities, 2. Offering a private prayer space, 3. Consider major religious holidays when creating the campus calendar, and 4. Ensure cultural competence of employees), are a starting point for community colleges. Future

research is needed to further investigate implications, support models, and how each demographic of student is impacted. As community colleges continue to serve a changing and diverse demographic of student, conversations must continue to be had about how the campus can pay attention to student needs, be a safe and welcoming environment, and provide cultural education and learning experiences to campus staff, faculty, and students.

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# APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

# FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

## Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects in Research

Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, 1010 Campus Drive FLITE 412F· Big Rapids, MI 49307

Date: March 22, 2017

To: Dr. Sandra Balkema and Ms. Kimberly Klein
From: Dr. Gregory Wellman, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application #170206 *(Experience of Muslim American Women attending Community College)*

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, *"Experience of Muslim American Women attending Community College"* (#170206) and determined that it meets Federal Regulations *Expedited-category 2F/2G.* This approval has an expiration of one year from the date of this letter. **As such, you may collect data according to the procedures outlined in your application until March 22, 2018**. Should additional time be needed to conduct your approved study, a request for extension must be submitted to the IRB a month prior to its expiration.

Your protocol has been assigned project number (#170206), which you should refer to in future correspondence involving this same research procedure. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

Understand that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights with assurance of participant understanding, followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document and investigators maintain consent records for a minimum of three years.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual reviews during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

Regards,

Ferris State University Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Version 1.2015

NORMANDALE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

February 16, 2017

Re: Experience of Muslim American Women attending Community College

Dear Ms. Klein,

The institutional review board (IRB) at Normandale Community College has approved your proposal. The study has been assigned number 0017-02.

We request that you notify our IRB when your project is complete.

Best wishes with your study.