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The Impact of Religiosity on the Educational Experiences  
of Muslims Students in Higher Education

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## **Introduction**

Many Muslim students prioritize higher education, but the needs of Muslim students on US college campuses receive little to no attention in higher education literature. In a *hadith*, which consists of narrations from the words of Prophet Muhammad, “Whoever travels a path seeking knowledge; God will [guide him] to travel a path that leads to heaven” (Al-Ghazālī, p. 14). Seeking knowledge serves as an act of worship for Muslims that leads one to heaven, a central goal for all believers. Another *hadith* mentions the obligation of seeking knowledge for every Muslim man and woman. While this *hadith* refers to Islamic education, any form of academia may be viewed as a form of worship in Islam, so long as it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by revelation (Halstead 2004). With both *hadith* in mind, the knowledge one gains and applies through higher education can be viewed from an Islamic standpoint as an important Islamic tenet.

To better recognize these relationships between Islam and education, this study focuses on answering the following: To what extent does a Muslim student’s level of religious practice affect their educational experiences in higher education? To what extent do Muslim students find a balance between religious practice and education?

## **Literature Review**

Little empirical research focuses on religiosity<sup>1</sup> and the educational experiences of Muslim students simultaneously. However, research has focused on the experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> For this thesis, I use terms used for referencing the different facets of religious practice including religiosity, religious commitment, religious engagement, and spiritual engagement interchangeably. These facets encompass involvement in acts of worship by Muslims such as praying their five daily prayers or attending religious services.

Muslim students within academic spaces. Research has also focused on how religiosity has shown to have an impact on education for practicing students. Thus, the following subsections outline the existing literature on (1) how religion influences education (Achour, Nor, Amel, Seman, and MohdYusoff 2017; Cole and Ahmadi 2010; Mayrl and Oeur 2009), (2) the education level of Muslims (McClendon, Hackett, Potančoková, Stonawski, and Skirbekk 2018; Pew Research Center 2016), (3) the experiences of Muslim students within education spaces (Ahmed and Garcia 2020; Cole and Ahmadi 2010; Mubarak 2007; Seward and Khan 2016; Speck 1997), (4) the benefits of religion on academic success (Lee 2002; Mayrl and Oeur 2009), and (5) religious commitment in higher education (Achour et al. 2017; Lee 2002; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007).

### **Influence of Religiosity on Education**

The meaning of education in Islamic contexts does not merely refer to learning or gaining knowledge. It encompasses the emphasis of knowledge, the growth to maturity, and the development of good manners (Halstead 2004). The Islamic faith encourages education, and many *hadith* narrate the religious value that comes with acquiring knowledge. Halstead (2004) explains that the Muslim concept of education aims to produce good Muslims with an understanding of Islamic rules of behavior and a strong knowledge of and commitment to the faith. Beyond just religious knowledge, any knowledge attained can and should be used for good.

Muslim students who choose to pursue higher education can use the knowledge they have gained to contribute to benefiting others. This contribution can be best understood when considering the level of religious practice Muslim students engage in

and how religiosity presents itself within academic spaces. I found that limited research has been conducted on the relationship between religion and education associated with Muslim students in the United States, but separate bodies of literature provide an explanation for the education of Muslim students and how religious commitment has appeared to influence education to a certain extent. The goal of this study looks to contribute more information on the educational experiences of Muslim students in higher education institutions while considering their commitment to the Islamic faith. Their commitment to the faith can be understood by identifying their engagement with religious practice and how it may reflect in their educational experiences.

In addition, this thesis aims to delve deeper in understanding the studies which have claimed that religious students perform better academically and how certain religious factors can positively affect one's education level (Achour et al. 2017; Mayrl and Oeur 2009). For instance, studies have found the benefits of religion on academic success and how religion may likely have an impact on educational outcomes (Cole and Ahmadi 2010). Previously, religion has rarely been considered a student characteristic integral to academic success or educational satisfaction (Cole and Ahmadi 2010), but religious engagement has appeared to enhance the satisfaction students acquire through their experiences in higher education (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). As seeking knowledge is a religious obligation within Islam, it would be useful to understand the various ways religion influences the pursuit towards education for Muslim students. Regardless, little research highlights the academic experiences of practicing Muslims who may pursue higher education as a way to fulfill a religious obligation.

## **Education Level of Muslims in Higher Education**

In their study on religion and education around the world, Pew Research Center's (2016) data regarding the educational attainment of Muslims looked at the global population of Muslim adults in 2010. In North America, Muslims with a higher education level (e.g., post-secondary education) made up 57% of the population whereas non-Muslims with a higher education level made up 40% of the population (combined). When looking at the global average, Muslims with a higher education level made up 8% of the population whereas non-Muslims with a higher education level made up 16% of the population (combined). While the global average showed lower for Muslims compared to non-Muslims, the number of Muslims with a higher education level within North America (i.e., United States and Canada) appears higher than the global average of Muslims with a higher education level and compared to any other one region (i.e., Europe, Asia-Pacific, Middle East-North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa) of Muslims with a higher education level. When considering the trends in education for Muslims, especially within North America, Muslims have made some of the greatest gains in educational achievement in recent decades.

Educational experiences in higher education related to achievement depend on many variables. Proper access to education ensures that Muslim students have high levels of educational attainment due to various factors that contribute to low levels of education. When looking at specific countries, the educational attainment for Muslim students is not merely based on the opinion of education as it relates to religion, but access to education. It is important to acknowledge that education levels become affected by uncontrollable



factors when identifying why Muslims have had some of the lowest average levels of educational attainment when looking at worldwide trends. These factors may include socioeconomic conditions, country economic conditions, structural constraints, government resources and migration policies, the presence or absence of armed conflict, and the prevalence of child labor and marriage (McClendon et al. 2018; Pew Research Center 2016). While these factors may significantly affect education levels, these factors do not play as large of a role in the education level trends for Muslims in the United States as compared to other regions.

As mentioned earlier, in North America specifically, Muslims with a higher education level made up 57% of the population and this average percentage appeared higher for both non-Muslims in North America and Muslims across the world. As such, when considering the number of Muslims with a higher education level in the United States, the underrepresentation of Muslim students in higher education literature puts the Muslim community at a disadvantage in understanding the educational experiences Muslim students encounter due to a lack of information provided to them. This study focuses on Muslim students in the United States to get a better idea on how they experience higher education based on their engagement in religious practice, while also accounting for their accessibility in educational opportunities. By focusing on a region such as the United States, the factors that could have an effect on the educational experiences encountered within education are minimized compared to other regions of the world. For instance, when accounting for the factors that lead to low levels of

education in certain regions, Pew Research Center (2016) actually found gains in educational attainment.

### ***Education Levels Based on Gender***

Muslims have made large educational gains within recent generations and have reduced the gender gap across generations. In fact, the gender gap has narrowed for Muslims in most regions and recent generations have seen a narrowing of the Muslim gender gap in educational attainment globally as women have made bigger gains than men (Pew Research Center 2016). The narrowing of these gaps for Muslims have resulted from more accessible education around the world, the changing views on education within the Muslim community, and the increase in higher education enrollment for Muslim women in recent years (McClendon et al. 2018). All these factors are also attributed to the level of education Muslims have attained in the United States due to accessibility.

With the increase in higher education enrollment for Muslim women in recent years, McClendon et al. (2018) suggest that Islam does not restrict Muslim women's educational attainment. They found that low levels of education for Muslim women in Muslim majority countries do not reflect religion or culture, but they actually reflect economic conditions and structural constraints. While McClendon et al. (2018) did not exclusively focus on Muslims in the United States, reflecting on the educational experiences of a wider population as a comparison provides insight as to how much, if at all, does a Muslim student's religiosity affect their education. When testing for an association between religiosity and education levels for Muslim women, McClendon et

al. (2018) found that Muslim women tend to have fewer years of schooling in countries where Muslims identified themselves as more religious, but the association did not prove to have statistical significance. Instead, they found that country income remained statistically significant when including religiosity. This reflects previously mentioned findings that explain how low education levels become affected by factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, that do not directly relate to religion. Regardless, Muslim women do well in countries that have high levels of attainment overall.

Muslim women tend to have more years of education, on average, in countries where they make up a religious minority than in countries where they make up the majority of the population (McClendon et al. 2018). Studies have shown that religious minorities often have more education, on average, than a country's majority religious group and found that religious minorities have more education, particularly when foreign born and come from a distant country (Pew Research Center 2016). While about a quarter of the Muslim population have been in the United States for three generations or longer, a majority of Muslims in the United States were born in another country or have at least one parent born in another country (Pew Research Center 2017). With this in mind, it is useful to acknowledge that immigrants' prior education when they enter the United States plays a large role in the subsequent educational attainment of their children (Baum and Flores 2011) as highly educated Muslims in countries with lower levels of education migrate to countries with higher levels of education (McClendon et al. 2018). The educational experiences of Muslim students also reflect in their levels of attainment since

their experiences in higher education are dependent on a multitude of factors that influence their educational outcomes.

### **Muslim Student Experiences in Higher Education**

There is a lack of empirical studies that highlight the voices of Muslim students in regard to their educational experiences that is shared from their personal perspectives (Seward and Khan 2016). This is detrimental to Muslim students as their religious and racial background influence how they navigate academic spaces to some extent. Without the perspectives of Muslim students themselves, it is hard to understand their unique challenges and what forms of support they need. For instance, findings suggest that identifying as a Muslim has an impact on the kinds of experiences Muslim students have in college (Cole and Ahmadi 2010) as they may face a number of personal, social, and structural challenges that deserve recognition at the institutional level (Ahmed and Garcia 2020). Without knowing these challenges from Muslim students themselves, it becomes harder to identify what factors significantly impact their encounters within higher education.

### ***Discrimination within Higher Education***

Muslim students are susceptible to different forms of discrimination that manifests through Islamophobia. Islamophobia exists as a form of racism that targets Muslims and those perceived as Muslim, causing them to suffer from discrimination and animosity due to their religious identity. Islamophobia has been defined as the fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam that results in individual and systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violence targeting Muslims and those perceived as Muslim (Green 2019).

Islamophobia has always been present, but there was a clear increase after September 11, 2001 (9/11) and after the presidential campaign in 2016 (Southern Poverty Law Center 2018).

Islamophobia incites harm against Muslims and has increased drastically within education spaces after 9/11 (Jandali 2013; Seward and Khan 2016). Since then, Muslims have faced increasing Islamophobia which emerges from both individuals and institutions (Seward and Khan 2016). Ali (2018) found that higher education institutions are another space for disciplinary action for Muslim students, and not a place for free discourse. For instance, Muslim students on college campuses are treated as suspects and are exposed to surveillance and policing both on and off campus. Since Muslim students are vulnerable to surveillance on campus, they worry their perspectives are unwanted or could be misunderstood. Unfortunately, Muslims have been and continue to be criminalized, targeted, and subjected to increasing threats of violence and discrimination. Ali (2018) contends that these practices, which have become synonymous with Islamophobia, most often happen within schools. Another drastic increase in Islamophobia presented itself during the presidential campaign in 2016 where discriminatory incidents against religious minorities became increasingly common among college campuses due to harmful rhetoric (Rifahie 2020). Islamophobia has also presented itself through prejudice towards Muslims, houses of worship being vandalized, and legislative initiatives which targets Muslims through institutionalized discrimination and government surveillance (Seward and Khan 2016). While the Islamophobia Muslim students confront may not directly present itself in the educational experiences influenced by religiosity, these forms of

discrimination shape how Muslim students view their higher education institutions and experiences due to their presence within academic spaces.

Muslim students observe a religion that is minoritized and at times feared-mongered within the United States, leading to misconceptions about the faith and those who follow it. As a result, Muslim students often find themselves and their religion grossly misunderstood by peers and faculty (Bowman and Small 2010; Speck 1997). Muslim students attending higher education institutions may find that their professors misunderstand their religious practices, they introduce misunderstandings about them, they lack respect for their religion within the classroom, or professors may not try to accommodate their religious practices (Speck 1997). The attitudes and behaviors of professors then affect Muslim students. In response, Muslim students feel a responsibility to represent Islam and the need to defend, correct, and acknowledge the stereotypes, ignorance, or misinformation about their religion and Muslims (McGuire, Casanova, and Davis III 2016; Oberoi and Trickett 2018; Seward and Khan 2016). Seward and Khan (2016) found that Muslim students explicitly challenge discrimination in order to create alternate images of Islam and Muslims for their peers, school administrators, and society. Even within religious groups on campus, Muslim students participating in Muslim Student Associations (MSA) have used their platform to dispel misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (Mubarak 2007). For instance, MSAs across North America hold an annual Islam Awareness Week. During this week, MSAs foster religious awareness by providing an information booth on Islam, hosting lectures, and engaging students who are interested in learning about Islam (Mubarak 2007).

### ***Religious Groups on Campus***

Muslim student religious groups on campus play a similar role as mosques. Often, Muslim student groups are established to debunk misperceptions, promote inclusion, and build community (Ahmadi and Cole 2020). Mubarak (2007) found that Muslim Student Associations (MSA) on campus have a significant impact on the college experience of Muslim students. MSAs have many purposes such as helping Muslim students better understand their religion, maintain their religious commitments, and provide a source of support. In response, Muslim students may have positive experiences within higher education if they find support from both a religious environment and school environment. Lee (2002) found that attending religious services leads to stronger personal religious beliefs and convictions in college. An important addition to higher education institutions for Muslim students includes having a MSA. This religious club can help Muslim students maintain their religious commitment and help with religious accommodations. For example, an obligation for Muslims consists of praying five times a day and a MSA can provide the space for Muslim students to pray on campus. This can lead to a positive higher education experience as Muslim students can fulfill their religious obligations without worry. Students who attend MSAs may find their sense of self within religious organizations and learn to better balance their religious practice and education. For a Muslim student who prioritizes both their religion and education, finding a balance supports a positive educational experience.

## **Religious Commitment in Higher Education**

Religion presents itself within academic spaces due to the importance education holds within Islam and how seeking knowledge entails a religious obligation. Religious commitment and higher education commitments reflect valuable aspects that require time and dedication. Finding a balance between religious practice and education would suggest finding satisfaction with the current level of education and level of religious practice Muslim students have acquired thus far. In a study conducted by Achour et al. (2017), the authors use religious commitment to define the degree to which a person observes their religious values, beliefs, and practices in their daily life. They found that education levels for Muslim students show a positive association with religious commitment. In addition, they found that the happiness of Muslim students relates to religiosity through educational attainment. Student satisfaction with their college experiences becomes strengthened by spiritual engagement as students who find meaning in religion happen to cope better with stressors than those who do not (Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

Mayrl and Oeur (2009) conclude that while religion has shown to have a beneficial effect on some student outcomes, the effect of student experiences as it relates to religious engagement continues to remain unclear in some areas. For example, the more time and investment religion requires from students, the less likely they engage with religion (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). This explains how students are more likely to believe in God and to pray occasionally than they are to attend services or participate in



campus religious organizations. Concurrently, higher education helps preserve the belief among students and reduces rates of religious decline.

Uecker et al. (2007) look to identify sources of religious decline in emerging adulthood consisting of diminished religious service attendance, diminished self-reported importance of religion, and disaffiliation of religion. These sources of religious decline facilitate comparisons in response to how higher education has been perceived as one of the common sources of religious decline. They found that, instead, individuals who opt out of college are more likely to face religious decline as they have higher odds of diminishing their religious service attendance. Previous thoughts emerged that since a decline in religious activity during college years exists, religious identity would change as a result. Instead, Lee (2002) argues that religious beliefs can occur separately from changing one's religious identity. Uecker et al. (2007) concluded that an overwhelming majority of college students maintain at least a static level of personal religiosity and their religious affiliation in early adulthood. Studies that look to identify the change in students' religion during college have shown an increase in the strength of students' religious convictions during college and how a majority of students claim that their religiosity remained stable or that their religiosity strengthened (Lee 2002; Uecker et al. 2007). While these studies look at religious groups as a whole, they can draw comparisons as to how the religious practice Muslim students participate in may influence their educational experiences while at higher education institutions. College is a time when religious change occurs, whether that includes introducing new belief systems (Lee 2002) or connecting with faith in a new way.

Muslim students attending higher education institutions have shown interest in learning about Islam to better understand their religion. While their religion may not have been considered as serious prior to higher education, Mubarak (2007) found that the college experience of Muslim students offers them the opportunity to connect with their religion in a way they did not experience formerly. She found that becoming friends with other Muslim students committed to the faith and participating in religious activities helps rebuild commitment to Islam. Religion appears to have a positive association with student satisfaction and a variety of prosocial behaviors (Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

Generally, religion has signified a powerful force in shaping individual values, providing an overall sense of purpose, forming connections with others, and building a sense of community (Lee 2002). Uecker et al. (2007) found that an overwhelming 82 percent of college students maintain a static level of personal religiosity and 86 percent retain their religious affiliation. These numbers suggest the importance of considering religiosity and the impact it has on the educational experiences of students. As mentioned earlier, there is limited empirical research that focuses on religiosity and the educational experiences of Muslim students in confluence. When considering the religious influence on education and the benefits of religion on academic success, it would best serve the needs of Muslim students to understand how their engagement in religious practice influences their educational experiences in higher education, especially when considering the importance of religion in the lives of practicing Muslim students. The concept of religion in the literature on Muslim students attending higher education warrants consideration due to the extent religion plays in the lives of so many who practice.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Cultural wealth nurtured by Communities of Color can be understood through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. CRT as a framework theorizes, examines, and challenges the way race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso 2005). For the purpose of this paper, implementing a tenet of CRT focuses on the educational experiences of Muslim students in higher education based on centering their personal perspectives. This paper looks at the educational experiences Muslim students confront which merits thought regarding the direct relationship between race and religion for Muslim students who account for both a racial and religious minority within the United States. This minority status will have some sort of influence on the experiences Muslim students encounter and how they navigate higher education spaces. For instance, Muslim students become susceptible to an increase in racism and discrimination due to their racial background, but considering CRT can help further explain how their religious background has an effect on educational experiences as well. Moreover, spiritual capital builds on the different forms of community cultural wealth which strive to transform education through community (Park et al. 2020). Utilization of spiritual capital by Muslim students presents itself within academic spaces when considering how religiosity signifies importance for the average practicing Muslim.

Religion serves as an important principle for practicing Muslims and deserves consideration when understanding how religion presents itself within the academic spaces Muslim students occupy. Due to the importance of religion, implementing spiritual

capital helps consider the impact of religiosity for Muslim students. This form of capital takes on an additional source of community cultural wealth proposed by Park, Dizon, and Malcolm (2020) in which Yosso (2005) originally identified as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized for survival and resisting forms of oppression. Spiritual capital establishes an understanding of how religion and spirituality serve as sources of strength, resilience, and capital (Park et al. 2020), referring to the “cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (Yosso 2005, p. 69). Muslim students apply spiritual capital when their motivation for pursuing higher education stems from an Islamic perspective of seeking knowledge. Implementing spiritual capital as a framework helps examine the way religion extends itself in the educational experiences of Muslim students.

### **Research Design**

For this thesis, I conducted interviews (remotely, due to COVID-19) with six Muslim Americans living in southern California about their educational experiences in higher education and their level of religious practice. More specifically, these interviews explored two research questions. First, to what extent does a Muslim student’s level of religious practice affect their educational experiences in higher education? Second, to what extent do Muslim students find a balance between religious practice and education?

### **Sample**

To be eligible for this study, individuals had to (a) self-identify as a Muslim, regardless of level of religious practice, (b) attend a higher education institution for at

least one quarter or semester in the United States, and (c) be at least 18 years of age. In order to recruit participants for the study, I sent an email to Muslim students who attend the young adult program at a local mosque in southern California. I first administered an online background survey (Appendix A) as a selection criterion for a separate individual interview in which fourteen people provided open responses to the question: “How would you describe your level of religious practice?” From these, I emailed seven participants about potential interest in an individual interview with me. I chose participants based on how they answered the previous question. Two of the participants said they consistently practice Islam and implement voluntary acts of worship, three of the participants said they consistently practice Islam, and the other two participants said they are practicing Muslims, but they feel that their religious practice is lacking in some areas. I ultimately conducted semi-structured interviews (remotely) with six of these participants. The seventh participant had a personal matter that arose and was not able to participate any further. Four of my interviewees identified as women and two as men. I provide more information on each participant, with pseudonyms, below:

Nour, a pre-med student, was in her second year of undergraduate education at a four-year university. Her degree objective is to receive a bachelor’s degree in Biology. Nour identifies herself as Middle Eastern as she is originally from Iraq.

Bella, a pre-med student, was in her second year of undergraduate education at a four-year university. Her degree objective is to receive a bachelor’s in Human Biology. Bella identifies herself as Middle Eastern as she is originally from Iraq.

Aisha was in her second year of undergraduate education at a community college. Her degree objective is to receive an associate degree in Psychological Sciences before transferring and earning her bachelor's degree in the same area. Aisha mostly identifies herself as Middle Eastern and North African as her family is from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey.

Zain was in his fifth year of undergraduate education at a four-year university. He was initially at a community college before he transferred after completing his associates in Mathematics and Physics. His degree objective is to receive a bachelor's degree in Computer Science. Zain identifies as South Asian as he is originally from Pakistan.

Salahuddin was in his second year of undergraduate education at a community college. His degree objective is to receive a bachelor's degree in Pharmaceutical Sciences and is a pre-med student. Salahuddin identifies himself as South Asian as he is originally from Afghanistan.

Yasna graduated with a bachelor's degree in Pharmaceutical Sciences from a four-year university after transferring from a community college. She was in New York for community college before attending a four-year university in California. Yasna also identifies herself as South Asian as she is originally from Afghanistan.

The interviews consisted of seventeen questions organized around three sections: education, religion, and the intersection between the two (Appendix B). With the participants' permission, I audio recorded each interview. I then transcribed them verbatim in order to find commonalities, or a lack thereof, among the participant responses.

## **Findings**

I found that Muslim students have an overall satisfaction with their educational experiences when considering the influence of religion. Religion plays a significant role in why Muslim students choose to pursue higher education and contributes to how they navigate such spaces. For Muslim students, spiritual capital can be viewed as an additional form of community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) due to the way religious engagement has shown to influence their educational experiences (Park et al. 2020). I found that Muslim students are more likely to be satisfied with their higher education institution when a religious group on campus is present. For instance, Muslim Student Associations (MSA) accommodate the social and religious needs of Muslim students within higher education spaces and provide an overall acceptable educational experience for those who seek out their resources. When considering the effort higher education requires from students, I found that Muslim students adapt to prioritizing both their education and religion while attending higher education institutions.

Furthermore, this study included both men and women, but I found no distinct differences between genders in terms of religious practice or how Muslim students engage in higher education. Instead, religious influence on education was a recurrent finding due to the importance of seeking knowledge within Islam. While both education and religion were found as priorities for Muslim students, religion was more prominent, explaining the importance in recognizing how religion presents itself within academic spaces. The following findings are explained in the order they were asked in the individual interviews: (a) education, (b) religion, and (c) both education and religion. Part

I and II of the findings focus on education and religion separately. Part III of the findings is where I gage education and religion in order to explore my two research questions in more detail.

## **Findings: Part I**

### **Assessing Education and Experiences**

To answer my research questions, I asked interviewees five questions centered solely around education: (a) What is the highest level of education you have completed or plan to complete?, (b) Why did you choose to pursue higher education?, (c) What role does education play in your life?, (d) Are there external factors influencing your educational attainment and trajectory?, and (e) How would you describe your overall experience within higher education?

The participants in this study stated that they chose to pursue higher education for various reasons such as financial independence, sense of security, status within their communities, and to expand their knowledge through higher education. This pursuance results in what the participants view as social mobility, achieving aspirations, and gaining knowledge. Regardless of their reasoning, the participants view higher education as an important objective to be obtained. For some participants, the influence of religion on their educational endeavors was significant, especially for those who consider the religious obligation of seeking knowledge as their purpose for continuing on to higher education. This exemplifies the way religious commitment may encourage Muslim students to pursue education and serves as a form of spiritual capital, which arises as an additional form of community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005).



### *Pursuing Higher Education*

I asked the participants “Why did you choose to pursue higher education?” and the most common answers reflect financial independence, sense of security, status within their communities, and to expand their knowledge. The participants view financial independence as a form of stability attainable through a higher education degree. Higher education serves as a means to attain financial independence in which one can financially support themselves. While as, a sense of security arises from ensuring that the degree one will obtain from having a higher education will support them regardless of the situation they are in. Status within their communities originated from familial influence to graduate and obtain a respectable position. The participants suggest that higher education holds prestige within their community, especially when those around them have already obtained a certain level of education. Other participants mentioned that they come from a family with many educated individuals and therefore, educational attainment was a necessity.

Nour mentioned that pursuing higher education was a means toward financial independence and status within her community as “having a higher education [degree] just gives someone...a good prestige.” Aisha had a similar response to Nour in that she chose to pursue higher education for financial reasons. She explained that she was told to pursue higher education to financially support herself, but she also found higher education helpful in expanding her knowledge as she enjoys learning and how much her own skills grow through education. Aisha’s reasoning for pursuing higher education as skill building exemplifies the way education in Islamic contexts does not only refer to

learning, but the emphasis of knowledge and all that one can gain from said knowledge (Halstead 2004).

Additionally, pursuing higher education helps one feel a sense of security. For instance, Bella chose to pursue higher education because she believes that “higher education is one of the most important things you can own in life...no matter what, no matter what happens in the world, no matter what you go through, you will have that regardless of the situation.” Muslim students in North America view higher education as a form of security when acknowledging uncontrollable factors that have led to low levels of education for Muslim women in other countries (McClendon et al. 2018; Pew Research Center 2016). For instance, even though it was not explicitly mentioned, access to higher education is a privilege that not everyone has access to and Muslim women in North America recognize this. When speaking with the participants, most of the women referenced stories from Muslim majority countries in which they know of women in situations that make it hard for them to overcome without a higher education degree. To be more specific, obtaining a higher education degree was a sense of security that protects women from factors such as undesirable socioeconomic conditions or structural constraints. While these factors are often uncontrollable, Muslim students view higher education in the United States as attainable, further promoting higher education as a sense of security that reinforces social mobility. In this instance, striving towards a higher education degree stems from aspirational capital as Muslim students have the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even when acknowledging perceived barriers (Yosso 2005) due to outside factors. Zain had a similar perspective as Bella in that having

a degree gives a sense of security in case of uncertainties. He also mentioned that he pursued higher education for his parents because “they feel like a degree is something their child needs to have in order to be successful in the eyes of other people. It is also a status thing in [his] culture.” Salahuddin mentions how education has always been a part of his life and claims that education is very highly viewed in his family. Yasna shared a similar sentiment as Zain and Salahuddin in that “there is sort of an expectation if you come from a family with educated people, so it is kind of [a] family goal.” Yosso (2005) identifies familial capital as a form of cultural wealth that engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family. Familial capital refers to cultural knowledges nurtured among kin, which I identified in the way Muslim students pursue higher education in response to norms within their communities and families. For instance, Zain mentioned that a higher education degree is related to status and success within his culture, while Salahuddin and Yasna mentioned how education is viewed in their family. When considering what higher education represents for these individuals, familial capital is nurtured as Muslim students consider how education is regarded within their families and their racial and religious communities.

All the participants affirmed that education plays a significant role when asked “What role does education play in your life?” Higher education was seen as a way to expand one's knowledge and all the participants mentioned some way education has benefited them. This was attributed to the fact that education provides access to social mobility, aspirations, and gaining knowledge. Nour explains that education is her means to achieve all her dreams and goals in the future. She even claims that without education,

she would be “no one.” Bella mentions that “you can never learn so much that you are fulfilled with education. You are constantly learning, and you should always be striving for being more educated and filling in gaps in certain aspects of your life.” Aisha and Zain mention that higher education helps them to critically think about the world around them and use the knowledge they have learned by applying it in their daily endeavors. Salahuddin and Yasna mentioned that the role education plays in their life has a lot to do with religion. This is important to consider as education intersects with religion for Muslim students, particularly when accounting for the religious obligation of seeking knowledge. Salahuddin affirmed that education plays an essential role, especially as a Muslim, since “we’re supposed to seek knowledge, we’re supposed to educate ourselves.” Park et al. (2020) mention that religion is often deeply tied to motivation to pursue aspirations. They also explain the way religion may encourage students to pursue meaning, which is seen in the way education is often viewed from a religious perspective. For example, Yasna stated “I want to pursue something, you know, something for my *deen* (religion). Pursuing higher education is part of our *deen*, to learn throughout life.” This exemplifies the spiritual capital Muslim students obtain through knowledge, which is accumulated from the religious obligation of seeking knowledge. In a later section, I focus on how broadening one’s knowledge emanated from a religious perspective as Islam encourages educating the self.

### ***Academic Experiences in Higher Education***

The educational experiences of Muslim students differ based on their academic and social encounters. When the participants were asked “How would you describe your

overall experience within higher education?,” most of the answers stemmed from an academic perspective. Most of the participants concur that their academic experiences within higher education have been positive, but some concerns exist regardless. Nour was content with her overall experiences and found her experience within higher education to be “better than most people.” Salahuddin also commented that his academic experiences have been better than most and attributes it to his professors treating him well and being fair with him. Bella and Aisha also shared contentment with their experiences, but they had concerns due to the remote learning taking place due to COVID-19. Bella felt that her experience in remote learning hindered her ability to learn more and Aisha felt that the interactive side of learning that helps her retain information was missing. While they were learning new content, there was clearly something absent due to remote learning. On the other hand, Yasna graduated before COVID-19 and specifically stated that there was nothing that occurred which hindered her education as she had a great experience overall. Zain was the least content from the participants when asked about his overall experience within higher education. He found it unsettling due to the anxiety he experienced when comparing himself to his peers or realizing the difference in K-12 education compared to higher education. At the same time, he mentions how this has helped him learn more about himself and higher education to the point that it built his personality and character. The participants were more likely to have favorable responses when reflecting on their academic experiences in higher education, even though there were still existing concerns. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of empirical studies that highlight the educational experiences of Muslim students from their personal perspectives

(Seward and Khan 2016). Thus, this section focuses on the educational experiences of Muslim students based on academics. I later discuss the educational experiences of Muslim students based on social encounters.

## **Findings: Part II**

### **Religious Practice**

To answer my research questions, I asked interviewees five questions centered solely around religious practice: (a) Can you describe where you feel that you are in terms of religious practice?, (b) Are you consistent in religious practice?, (c) How often do you attend the mosque and when?, (d) What resources do you find readily available for your religious needs?, and (e) Does your religious practice influence how you perceive things?

The participants were all Muslim students who had some level of religious practice that they were consistent in. This helped gauge the religiosity of participants when considering how it affects their educational experiences. To some extent, their consistency reflects the role religious practice plays when students navigate their higher education institutions, especially when considering that student satisfaction with their experiences in college are strengthened by spiritual engagement (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). In addition, it is important to recognize the relevance of religion for students of Color (Park et al. 2020).

The Muslim students I interviewed often compared religious practice to education in that they both require some type of commitment. For instance, when I asked the participants, “Can you describe where you feel that you are in terms of religious

practice?,” half of the participants included education as a comparison within their response. Bella mentioned how “religious experience or religious practice is similar to education in the way that there is always room for improvement. You can always strive to go higher and to learn more about your Islam and your religion.” She compared her religious growth to her educational growth by elucidating how they both have components to improve on and are both types of knowledge that can be gained. Aisha explained that while her religious practice is more significant and is part of her identity, it is similar to education in that it is intertwined with her daily life. After explaining her consistency with her religious practice, Yasna did admit that her religious practice has been lessened due to her educational responsibilities. This reflects the way students are less likely to engage with religion when more time and investment is required of them (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). It is not that religion lost its importance, but higher education requires a certain amount of effort. In a later section, I expound on how this hindrance can be alleviated by explaining what factors contribute to a more positive educational experience while considering the ability to engage with religion in higher education spaces.

Furthermore, I noticed that Muslim students attending higher education institutions practice their religion to some extent, regardless of other commitments they may have. While this study used a small sample population, the participants all identify as Muslim students who view education and religion as important and central components in their life. This expounds on Park et al.’s (2020) claim that the significance of religion and spirituality in the everyday lived experiences of people of Color relates to

education in both formal and informal settings. In addition, religion was examined to focus on understanding the educational experiences of Muslim students based on their religious identity and engagement as following Islam holds importance for the average practicing Muslim. Understanding the way Muslim students navigate their life around their religious beliefs and practices gives more insight into its significance and how it affects their education. As Mubarak (2007) found, Muslim students in higher education are provided with a chance to connect with their religion in a new way. This warrants consideration as to how religion and education intersect in the lives of Muslim students at such a pivotal moment in their lives.

### **Findings: Part III**

#### **Gaging Education, Religion, and Experiences**

To answer my research questions in more detail, I asked participants the following questions: (a) Are you involved in any religious clubs/groups on campus?, (b) How would you describe the religious tolerance on campus?, (c) If your university has a place to pray on campus, would you feel comfortable using it?, (d) Does the higher education institution you attend accommodate the needs of Muslim students?, (e) Are there any resources your school could provide for your religious needs?, (f) Has religion shaped your perception of education in any way?, and (g) How do you manage balancing religion and school? The assessment of education and experiences are based exclusively on the statements the participants shared.

I found that religious groups are an important accommodation Muslim students seek out on college campuses. Muslim Student Associations (MSA) are particularly



useful in providing both educational and religious resources. For instance, educational resources include lectures and religious resources include a prayer space where students can fulfill their religious obligations. Additionally, these resources contribute to more religious tolerance towards Muslim students from non-Muslims attending the same institution as they become more familiar with Muslims and their practices. As a result, Muslim students who find their college campus to be more religiously tolerant have better educational experiences within such spaces. Religious communities have also shown to provide resources and knowledge that support students in achieving their educational goals (Park et al. 2020). The religious perspective on education that Muslim students hold also impacts their educational experiences as education becomes a way Muslim students engage their faith. It also impacts the way they view their educational trajectory and their motivation to pursue higher education. In this way, religion serves as a key source for community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) as it influences educational opportunities (Park et al. 2020) for Muslim students.

### ***Accommodating the Needs of Muslim Students***

While there are established religious clubs or organizations on campus that help improve the educational experiences of Muslim students, I found that the most common institutional factor Muslim students are accommodated with is a Muslim Student Association (MSA) on campus. This student group serves to meet the religious needs of Muslim students and has shown to significantly impact their college experience. In addition, religious and spiritual communities, which MSAs provide, play an important role in supporting students (Park et al. 2020). MSA is also useful in providing students

with resources that meet their social, religious, and educational needs. In this instance, MSAs serve as a form of social capital for Muslim students in that they provide support in navigating their higher education institutions and are often composed of networks of people and community resources that benefit students (Yosso 2005). Additionally, campuses with established MSAs often have a more tolerant and accommodating campus environment for Muslim students as they also provide a designated area for prayer. An area for prayer is particularly important for Muslim students in order to complete their religious obligation for the five daily prayers.

**Muslim Student Association (MSA).** I asked participants “Are you involved in any religious clubs/groups on campus?” to better understand the intersection of education and religion for the participants. Based on all the participant responses, Nour and Bella are the most active with their involvement in a Muslim Student Association (MSA), Zain and Yasna are not as involved due to other commitments, and Aisha and Salahuddin do not have an existing MSA at their community college.

Nour attends a higher education institution with a very active MSA that continued to provide religious resources during COVID-19. She mentioned that her attendance in MSA occurred through virtual classes, sister circles, and *halaqas* (religious gatherings). These events are an example of the social capital provided through MSA as such resources serve to help Muslim students maintain their religious commitments by simultaneously helping them better understand their religion (Mubarak 2007). Bella, who is very involved with her MSA, explained that

Text 1

“Having that [religious] community in your university is really, really significant...having that community, having that constant reminder when you’re on campus, seeing the people around you, seeing the people who also practice your religion will remind you of your religion.”

As seen in Bella’s explanation, MSAs help build community and promote inclusion (Ahmadi and Cole 2020). The community MSA provides is important for practicing Muslims and impacts their experiences in higher education (Mubarak 2007), especially when considering how students can benefit from such spaces. While Zain was aware of a MSA at his institution, he mentioned that he does not attend as often because he is occupied with his academic responsibilities. Yasna was also occupied with academics and mentioned that MSA was more of a place to fulfill her religious obligation for prayer and a place to break her fast with other Muslims during Ramadan. Aisha and Salahuddin did not have an established MSA or Muslim religious group on campus, but Aisha mentioned that other students were trying to organize one.

Islam and higher education both require some form of commitment and the way Muslim students balance both aspects may affect their educational experiences, especially when they are both priorities in one’s life. Additionally, when I asked participants “How do you manage balancing religion and school?” in order to answer my second research question, I found that participation in a MSA and the religious obligation for the five daily prayers were common across participant responses.

MSA is a useful resource that provides Muslim students with a space for support that spans religious and educational needs. I found that Muslim students who had a MSA

at their school would often attend events and pray their daily prayers there, creating an easier balance between religion and school. MSA benefits Muslim students as it serves as a reminder of religious priorities and helps them fulfill their religious obligations while on campus. Bella explained how

Text 2

“Without having [a MSA] on campus, I feel like I would be lacking in some of my religious practices because of the fact that I would be so distracted with my schooling, my other worldly distractions...It reminds me that education always comes after my religious practice, and it reminds me of my priorities in life.

Through [MSA], I am able to balance both things and both aspects of my life.”

Aisha, who attends a community college without a MSA, explains that her education consumes all her time and it becomes harder for her to find a balance between religion and school. While she is able to complete different religious obligations, such as the five daily prayers, she explains that

Text 3

“Courses can be very demanding...in terms of extra practice, if it is like extra [Islamic] education or attending the mosque more, I do not have as many opportunities for that and so I feel like because school takes so much of my time...it is like a block to pursuing other things...unfortunately, the demands of college push you into a place where there is not room for much else.”

As mentioned earlier, MSAs have many purposes such as helping Muslim students maintain their religious commitments and provide a source of support. They also provide

educational resources that are useful to students. Aisha shared her concern that “courses can be very demanding” where she feels like she cannot increase her voluntary religious practice. This was consistent with what Mayrl and Oeur (2009) found in that students become less likely to engage with religion the more time and investment it requires of them. Aisha was one of the participants who attended a community college without an established MSA and found it hard to balance her educational and religious responsibilities. Based on previous findings that show the benefits of MSAs, Aisha may have had a better educational experience if there was an established MSA on campus. It could have supported her educational needs, while simultaneously serving as a resource for gaining Islamic knowledge. As Park et al. (2020) explain, religious communities play a particularly important role in supporting students. In all, MSA has proven to be a useful resource for Muslim students both academically and religiously. MSAs reinforce the spiritual capital Muslim students already possess as it has been shown to be a form of community that transforms the educational experiences of Muslim students in a more positive way.

**Prayer on Campus.** Generally, managing a balance between religion and higher education is possible for Muslim students based on access to a Muslim Student Association (MSA) on campus and their ability to implement their religious practice (e.g., prayer) while attending higher education. Prayer makes up one of the five pillars of Islam and highlights one of the most important religious obligations upon a Muslim. Muslim students may often need to fulfill their prayer obligation while on campus. When asking the participants “If your university has a place to pray on campus, would you feel

comfortable using it?,” all the participants claimed that they would pray on campus if needed, but the amount of comfort differed from one person to another. Participants felt more comfortable praying on campus when there was a designated area to pray.

For instance, Nour mentioned that her school has an interfaith building where she could pray, but she does not know how comfortable she would feel praying in front of non-Muslims. At the same time, she proclaimed that she does not want to miss a prayer just because she is too embarrassed to pray in front of others. Similar to Nour when considering comfortability, Aisha states

Text 4

“It would depend on how private it is...if it was a quiet, private space, definitely! But if it was some place where people could just walk in and out and there was no clear indicator that [it] is a private place, then I’d probably feel a little less comfortable using it or I would feel rushed in my prayer.”

Bella felt comfortable praying on campus and mentioned how her university’s MSA provides a place to pray and conducts *jummah*, which is the Friday congregational prayer Muslims partake in. This is useful in leading to stronger religious beliefs that arise from attending religious services while in college (Lee 2002), especially when considering the significance of *jummah* prayer and the *khutbah* (sermon) that is given before prayer. Zain also felt comfortable praying on campus and mentioned that his university has a designated place for prayer. Even though it was not specific to Muslims, it was a meditation room that was open for people who needed a place to pray. Salahuddin also felt comfortable and preferred a designated place to pray. He felt that having a place for

prayer meant it would be clean and he does not have to worry about finding a place to pray or whether he has his prayer mat on him. Yasna also mentioned that she felt comfortable and preferred a designated place to pray. She mentioned how she would “usually pray in the back of the library, behind the bookshelves, where nobody would see” so “[if her] university had a room designated for prayer only, [she] would feel more comfortable.” She even mentioned that she felt like she was alone most of the time because her university did not have a specific place for Muslims to pray on campus outside of the MSA.

Based on some of the responses, Muslim students felt discomfort when there was not a designated place for prayer and students would need to seek out a clean and quiet place to pray. This area for prayer does not necessarily have to contain a place solely for Muslims, but it could be a community meditation room or community prayer room that remains open to all students who attend the institution. Muslim students who can complete their religious obligations on campus appeared to have a more positive educational experience within higher education, especially for those who stay more practicing and consistent in their religious practice. The positive experience resulted from many factors such as having an accommodating place on campus to fulfill their religious obligations or to have a space shared with other Muslim students.

When I asked the participants, “Are there any resources your school could provide for your religious needs?,” the top two resources mentioned include a clean prayer room specific to Muslims and clean bathrooms to make ablution. Aisha said that a prayer space would be amongst the most important, especially when classes are in full

session. She explained that people are on campus all day and they are put in a situation where they have to seek out places to pray. Zain also mentioned a prayer space as a potential resource. While his campus has a meditation room, Zain mentioned that a room specifically for *salah* (prayer) would be nice. Salahuddin and Yasna both introduced the idea of having a prayer room and clean bathrooms to make ablution in. Yasna suggested that monetary resources would be useful in funding religious groups on campus to provide Muslim students with their religious needs. She mentioned that the funding could go to facilities such as a prayer room and bathrooms set up in a way that make it easy for Muslim students to complete their ablution. She also offered the idea that the funding could help invite Muslim speakers to give talks that are open to non-Muslims as well. These talks would serve as a way to debunk misperceptions non-Muslims have about Muslims (Ahmadi and Cole 2020).

Returning to the question of “How do you manage balancing religion and school?,” a majority of the participants said that prayer is a great support. Prayer is a form of spiritual capital that Muslim students possess due to the benefits it provides. In terms of higher education, it is an element that makes pursuing higher education easier in terms of how Muslim students find a way to engage both their faith and education. For example, Nour expressed that the five daily prayers force her to take a break and let her focus on worship, which in turn helps her balance religion and school because she gets to take a break from studying. In this instance, prayer serves as a form of navigational capital (Yosso 2005) coupled with spiritual capital as it provides Nour with a way to navigate the educational responsibilities from her higher education institution, while also



focusing on her religious responsibilities. Zain explained how “being able to pray five times a day adds more structure to your day. Having structure in your day, just in general, helps you be more organized and helps you be more motivated as well.” Salahuddin explains that prayer does not take too much time from the day and claims that Islam makes it very easy to practice it. He does not see a problem with balancing religion and school because he sees prayer, in essence, as an undemanding obligation. Yasna also did not find prayer to be demanding and claims it as a part of her routine. She explains that praying five times a day is a way to practice her religion and it has become so ingrained in her day that she does not necessarily need to “balance” religion and school due to the role they both play in her life. She actually found herself to be more controlled in her five daily prayers than she is with school and managing classes. In essence, prayer is a way Muslim students balance their religious practice and education. The five daily prayers in Islam are at a prescribed time which adds structure to one’s day. This then contributes to an easier balance for Muslim students who actively practice their faith and attend higher education.

There has been a recommendation for further study on spiritual capital when considering faith and prayer as sources of capital within education (Park et al. 2020). I would further contend that this is particularly important for Muslim students who center their lives around the five daily prayers when considering it as a religious obligation, but also as a form of religious practice that is prioritized and significantly important for the average practicing Muslim. This is in addition to the benefit prayer has shown in helping Muslim students manage a balance between religious and educational responsibilities.

Overall, I found that fulfilling the religious obligation of prayer on campus is important for Muslim students. Muslim students are more likely to show contentment with their educational experiences when they have access to a clean and quiet place to pray. An accommodation such as this one contributes to students feeling comfortable since physical spaces for these practices enhance Muslim students' sense of safe identities on campus (Ahmed and Garcia 2020; Nasir and Al-Amin 2006). Additionally, it helps with the religious tolerance Muslim students are exposed to as others outside the faith become more familiar with the religious practices of Muslims.

### ***Religious Tolerance on Campus***

Muslim students contribute to the religious diversity on campus which warrants consideration towards the higher education literature in understanding how religious diversity has an impact on the educational outcomes of students and leads to a more tolerable campus environment. Religious tolerance on campus is going to significantly impact the educational experiences Muslim students confront, especially when considering immediate social encounters. I found that the religious tolerance towards Muslim students on campus differed between community colleges and four-year universities, especially when considering the diversity on campus and the presence of an established Muslim Student Association (MSA) or designated prayer space. MSAs and designated prayer spaces create a more tolerable environment for Muslim students as they create inclusion and have been found to contribute to a space that Muslim students feel comfortable in (Ahmed and Garcia 2020; Nasir and Al-Amin 2006). MSAs also serve as

a way to build spiritual capital when noting how religious communities play a particularly important role in supporting students (Park et al. 2020).

When asking the participants “How would you describe the religious tolerance on campus?,” the general consensus among participants was that individuals outside the faith were religiously tolerant due to the diversity of the higher education institutions they attend. Nour mentioned that her institution was more tolerant than other private universities and she credits that to the population of Muslims at her university. Bella found that people are very tolerant and supporting of Muslim religious beliefs and has had non-Muslims approach her with questions about the faith. Bella shared that “through MSA, [she] believes that there is a lot of acceptance and tolerance from the university to [her] religious beliefs and practices.” This is consistent with how Muslim student groups are often established and found to debunk misperceptions, promote inclusion, and build community (Ahmadi and Cole 2020). Zain also found his campus to be religiously tolerant and mentioned that “part of that reason is because the MSA presence at [his university] is very strong.” Salahuddin and Yasna both found that the campus diversity present at their institutions led to a more tolerant environment, especially considering if Muslims prayed outside. While Yasna did say there were some curious looks here and there, no direct interaction took place that would affect Muslim students who prayed publicly on campus in a negative way. Most Muslim students find their institution to be religiously tolerant when religious diversity is present. As Cole and Ahmadi (2010) allude to, religious diversity has an impact on the educational outcomes for students and helps contribute to the overall construct of campus diversity. Additionally, campuses with

established MSAs seemed to have a more tolerant and accommodating campus environment for Muslim students which reflected in positive educational experiences within higher education spaces.

At the same time, it is important to note that religious tolerance does not equate to a campus free from Islamophobia. While acts of overt racism and xenophobia continue to exist, so do acts of covert discrimination. Aisha reported a lack of religious tolerance due to an encounter she had with faculty members that consisted of biases and stereotypes. As a note, Aisha was the only participant who wore the hijab at the time of the interview, making her more susceptible to Islamophobia as a form of racism that targets those easily identified as Muslim. Her encounters within higher education spaces differ from the other participants due to her visibility as a Muslim woman who wears the hijab. Differences in experiences worsen when students exhibit outward identification with Islam, such as wearing a hijab (Seward and Khan 2016). When considering her encounters with faculty at her community college, Aisha explained how

Text 5

“I did a mental health evaluation [at the health center on campus] and I definitely felt that the person who evaluated me had some bias because of my religion...there was something that was very uncomfortable and had shaken my trust with the person. During the whole process, I felt like there was some bias involved and so that’s kind of my personal experience with the religious tolerance on campus. I think that overall, there’s probably good intention, but there have been some of those interactions where it felt like...they should have done better.”

Aisha's sentiment reflects the way students, staff, and faculty hold unconscious and conscious biases around Muslims and Islam as a whole. Many of these biases stem from stereotypes and misinformation (Ahmed and Garcia 2010) which can be combatted through educational workshops or training for staff who specifically work with Muslim students. This is important to consider as bias can harm the educational opportunities Muslim students come across as it unconsciously limits the attention faculty provide to students (Sabry and Bruna 2007). When asking Aisha about the resources her school could provide for her religious needs, she mentioned "a basic training for the faculty to have a little more awareness and reduce bias when dealing with Muslim students." As Muslim students may find themselves misunderstood by their peers and faculty (Bowman and Small 2010; Speck 1997), it is useful to account for the way educational workshops or training can help create understanding between Muslim students and those outside the faith. In addition, this can assist Muslim students in their educational and religious endeavors when they sense that their environment is supportive and understanding towards them and their needs.

Overall, it is important to consider how religious tolerance impacts the social encounters Muslim students confront within higher education as religious identity is important for Muslim students and impacts their experiences. The religious tolerance towards Muslim students on campus differed between higher education institutions, especially when considering the existing diversity on campus and the presence of an established MSA or a designated prayer space. MSAs have not only proven to benefit the educational experiences Muslim students come across, but they also contribute to

providing a space for Muslim students, while simultaneously familiarizing non-Muslims with Islam. The religious tolerance on campus is important in providing a comfortable environment for Muslim students, especially when considering their position as religious minorities who are susceptible to discrimination and biases.

### ***Religious Perspective on Education***

Overall, I found that religion shaped the perception of education for Muslim students in beneficial ways and served as a form of spiritual capital that grounds Muslim students and serves as motivation to continue seeking knowledge. The participants were aware about the importance education and knowledge hold within Islam, and this affected how they perceive higher education. To answer my first research question, I asked the participants “Has religion shaped your perception of education in any way?” They all focused on the way religion encourages them to pursue higher education and how religion influences their interactions within higher education spaces. Religion is a form of spiritual capital for Muslim students when considering how it impacts the way they navigate academic spaces within higher education. This idea of spiritual capital builds on the cultural wealth nurtured by communities of Color when recognizing how Muslim students encompass knowledge, skills, and abilities in their higher education endeavors through religion as a source of strength. Religion also serves as a form of motivation for Muslim students to pursue more in regard to their education. As Nour beautifully put it, religion shaped her view of education because of “*talib ul ilm*,” which translates to “student of knowledge.” Nour reflected on the way religion gives more purpose into why she studies and why she actively pursues higher education. She even viewed her

educational trajectory as a personal *fardh*, meaning religious duty, because she views her goal of becoming a doctor as her life purpose in which she can assist people. Nour exemplifies the way this personal *fardh* is a form of spiritual capital in which her spiritual beliefs encourage her to pursue meaning and life purpose through long-term goals (Park et al. 2020) such as becoming a doctor. Bella said religion plays a part in her education because of the *hadith* mentioned earlier that God will make the path to paradise easy for those who seek knowledge. She feels like Islam emphasizes education and how every Muslim has a duty to “continue education, continue learning, and obtain knowledge.” The way religion shaped Aisha’s perception of education differed compared to the other participants, but it still had an influence on her. Aisha found that religion shaped her education through her relationships with her professors. She compared the level of respect they deserve as unique to them, the same way a certain amount of respect is deserved with parents, with scholars, or with religious authorities. This form of respect stems from the development of good manners (Halstead 2004), an additional form of education found within Islamic contexts. She explained that professors have a “heightened status that you need to be respectful to them and accept their knowledge.” As Islam holds education and knowledge to a high standard, it would make sense that those who impart their knowledge are held to a higher standard as well. Zain felt that the more he learned about Islam, the more he was able to learn about its history and all the prominent and educated Muslims from the past. He explains that learning about educated Muslims “allows [him] to recognize that Islam sort of encourages excellence in regard to

knowledge of the religion and knowledge of the world,” which has influenced his perception of education altogether. Zain explained how

Text 6

“Pursuing religion constitutes pursuing more in school...It’s not like religion is an impediment to my higher education. I feel like the opposite is true. Religion allows me to pursue more in higher education because it allows me to focus more.”

Zain exemplifies the way religion has been found to benefit academic success and impact educational outcomes (Cole and Ahmadi 2010). In this instance, Islam encourages academic success when it becomes a form of motivation for Muslim students to pursue higher education and do well. It is also an example of spiritual capital and how religion as a form of capital can facilitate educational success (Park et al. 2020). Furthermore, Salahuddin claimed that religion is his motivation for seeking higher education. He mentioned a misconception that is common in which religious people are perceived as ignorant while educated people are usually perceived as non-religious. In his case, he stated that

Text 7

“People [from all faiths who] I’ve found to be of higher education are always of higher religious practice. If it wasn’t for my religion, I probably wouldn’t pursue higher education as I do now...I probably wouldn’t strive to achieve as much as I do now. For me, knowledge and religion are intertwined. You can’t have one without the other.”



Yasna saw education from a *deen*, or religious, standpoint in which education is “basically gaining knowledge in life to understand God’s creation, God’s world, how to even be a better person.” Yasna reflects on the time she asked her mother why she has to go to school when she was younger, and her mother responded that “learning and being educated is a way of understanding how God’s creation works and...it is so important for you to be appreciative of the opportunity you have in receiving an education.” She attests that this was a life lesson and religion has shaped a much greater perception of her educational experience. Yasna demonstrates the way education can be a form of spiritual capital when considering the direct impact religion has. If it was not for her religious perspective on education, she would not consider how knowledge is a way to get closer to Islam by understanding God’s creation.

In all, Islam encourages seeking knowledge as a religious obligation and a means to attain *jannah*, heaven. As seen from all the participants, religion plays a huge role in the way Muslim students view higher education and actually serves as a way to encourage Muslim students to achieve knowledge through education. This exemplifies the way Muslim students implement spiritual capital when religion becomes a means for pursuing higher education. In a way, pursuing academic success aligns with spiritual values and religious upbringing (Park et al. 2020) for Muslim students. Thus, Muslim students are more likely to have positive educational experiences when considering the extent of their level of religious engagement in shaping their views on education.

## **Conclusion**

Religion and spiritual capital are key sources of community cultural wealth (Park et al. 2020; Yosso 2005) which have an influence on the higher education experiences for Muslim students. Higher education emerges as a high priority for Muslim students in the United States due to the way it helps fulfill the religious obligation of seeking knowledge. Muslim students possess an overall satisfaction with their educational experiences in higher education when they are able to fulfill their religious obligations and educational needs simultaneously. While religion has not been considered an integral component to academic success or educational satisfaction in the past, the level of religious practice Muslim students engage in has shown to have an influence on their educational experiences in higher education. Thus, observing involvement in religious practice aids in distinguishing the experiences Muslim students encounter as religious minorities within secular higher education institutions. Additionally, indicating the educational experiences Muslim students encounter based on religious engagement helps explain the extent that Islam plays in the lives of Muslim students. It is evident that education coincides with religion for Muslim students and this study seeks to exemplify religion and education as priorities that Muslim students navigate a balance between.

Religious diversity has an impact on the educational outcomes for students and helps contribute to the overall construct of campus diversity (Cole and Ahmadi 2010). While universities were once believed to be hostile to religion, Uecker et al. (2007) propose that the United States' institutions of higher learning have an abundant supply of religious organizations to meet the demands of students, especially those of minorities.

These organizations also serve a means to teach tolerance and respect for religion in the classroom. This supports the experiences Muslim students were found to have at diverse four-year universities. This study found that those who attend four-year universities are more likely to find their campuses as religiously tolerant and accepting, especially when accounting for established religious student groups on campus. Religious student groups also play a significant role in ensuring comfort within a community for Muslim students.

Muslim students have an easier time balancing their religious and educational responsibilities when institutions have religious clubs or organizations on campus. This exemplifies Mubarak's (2007) finding that the presence of a Muslim Student Association (MSA) chapter on campus has a significant impact on the college experience of Muslim students. Religious clubs or organizations like MSA provide an environment of solidarity, support, and resistance for Muslim students (Seward and Khan 2016). MSAs serve many functions which include providing social, religious, and educational needs, while also reinforcing religious commitment. The absence of a religious club or organization on campus makes it challenging for Muslim students to fulfill their religious needs such as finding a proper place to pray their obligatory five daily prayers. The challenge Muslim students have with difficulty implementing Islamic practice (e.g., prayer) in their school is not unique to higher education institutions. Findings have shown that Muslim students in high school also have difficulty and need to arrange personal accommodations in order to adhere to their religious practice (Seward and Khan 2016). Specific accommodations or resources Muslim students wish their schools could provide include a clean prayer room and clean bathrooms to make ablution in. Perhaps the most

important religious accommodation Muslim students seek in college includes securing a clean and relatively quiet place to pray on campus (Mubarak 2007). Muslim students need specific accommodations that help them implement their religious practice, which ultimately serves to build their religious identity. Religious accommodations assist as a form of support and understanding for the practices of religious minorities. When Muslim students receive such accommodations, they are more likely to have better experiences in higher education.

Religious minorities have their own struggles when navigating higher education spaces and some have argued that religious diversity in higher education should be taken as seriously as racial diversity (Bowman and Small 2010). Previous findings have shown that religious diversity may have an impact on the educational outcomes for students (Cole and Ahmadi 2010) which is important to consider as students from minority religious groups often face a lack of support or understanding of their religion. Studies have found that religious minority students who are well-supported and understood by others have shown positive gains in religious growth (McGuire et al. 2016). Additionally, faculty support for spiritual development has shown a positive association with spirituality outcomes (Bowman and Small 2010). Higher education institutions can foster both educational and religious aspects for Muslim students, especially when students sense that their environment supports and understands their educational and religious needs. On the other hand, bias can harm the educational opportunities of Muslim students as it may unconsciously limit the amount of time, attention, and feedback faculty provide (Sabry and Bruna 2007). In turn, this influences the educational experiences of Muslim

students which directly affects them due to the lack of support provided by faculty. With this in mind, it is important for higher education institutions to consider educational workshops or training for staff who specifically work with Muslim students. This study found that Muslim students who did not experience biases towards their religion felt that their campuses were more tolerant and accepting of diversity. This shows a more welcoming environment for Muslim students, which ultimately leads to positive educational experiences associated with spiritual development (Bowman and Small 2020).

Overall, Muslim students navigate a healthy balance between their religion and education which results in an overall satisfaction with their educational experiences in higher education. This study found that practicing Muslim students are able to find a balance between their religion and education due to the way their lives are structured around religious obligations. Even Muslim students not as firm or consistent in their religious practice mentioned that praying at a prescribed time helped structure their day to some extent. Uecker et al. (2007) claim that the most educated are also the least likely to report a decrease in religion's importance. While the participants had different educational backgrounds, they were educated college students who portrayed the importance of religion and how the attainment of education reflects in their religious practice. Participants did not claim that their religion's importance had decreased, but concerns arose regarding the difficulty in trying to implement more religious practices due to the responsibilities that come with attending higher education and earning a degree. The difficulty in implementing religious practice corresponds to how the more

time and investment religion requires of students, the less likely participation in religious practice occurs. For instance, students are more likely to believe in God and to pray occasionally than they are to attend services or participate in campus religious organizations (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). It is not that religion's importance decreased, but higher education requires more effort and time from students which may coincide with students' religious practice.

In the case for Muslim students, engaging in religious practice does not create a barrier to their education, but rather serves as a way to balance and prioritize their commitments. The way Muslim students engage with their faith presents itself as a form of spiritual capital that influences their education (Park et al. 2020). The time spent in religious practice did not decrease the commitment students had with higher education, but instead, it helped encourage them to pursue higher education and value how they spend their time. Education represents a high priority for Muslim students which becomes an act of worship when implemented due to the way higher education becomes a means to seek knowledge that benefits the individual and others. In conclusion, this study found that Muslim students possess an overall contentment with their educational experiences in higher education when they have the space to engage in religious practice while also attending to their educational needs in higher education.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

The research conducted had theoretical contributions in mind for participants, the Muslim community, and ultimately, the research literature as a whole. Possible benefits for the participants include a clearer understanding if their religious practice has a direct

correlation with their educational experiences. Participants may have gained a better understanding on whether an association between their engagement in religious practice and reasons for pursuing higher education exists. Additionally, this study may help the Muslim community better understand how Muslim students navigate academic spaces and how their religiosity overlaps with their encounters in higher education. The Muslim community may use this information to provide resources to Muslim students through the mosque or religious organizations on campus. Regarding the research literature, this study seeks to provide general information on the educational experiences of Muslim students in higher education institutions while also considering the extent of their religious background. This study looks to establish an understanding of how Muslim students navigate higher education spaces and what influences their perception of educational opportunities.

## **Appendix A**

### **Background Survey**

- Name: Free-text response
- Are you at least 18 years old? Pre-selected: Yes or No
- Have you completed at least one quarter/semester as an undergraduate? Pre-selected: Yes or No
- What is the highest degree you are currently working on or the highest degree you have completed? Free-text response
- Have you received a university degree within the last few years? Free-text response
- How would you describe your level of religious practice? Free-text response
- What is your preferred contact method?
  - Phone: Free-text response
  - Email: Free-text response



**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol**

Education Related Questions:

- What is the highest level of education you have completed or plan to complete?
- Why did you choose to pursue higher education?
- What role does education play in your life?
- Are there external factors influencing your educational attainment and trajectory?
- How would you describe your overall experience within higher education?

Religion Related Questions:

- Can you describe where you feel that you are in terms of religious practice?
- Are you consistent in religious practice?
  - How often do you attend the mosque and when?
- What resources do you find readily available for your religious needs?
- Does your religious practice influence how you perceive things?

Education and Religion Questions:

- Are you involved in any religious clubs/groups on campus?
- How would you describe the religious tolerance on campus?
  - If your university has a place to pray on campus, would you feel comfortable using it?
  - Does the higher education institution you attend accommodate the needs of Muslim students?
- Are there any resources your school could provide for your religious needs?
- Has religion shaped your perception of education in any way?
- How do you manage balancing religion and school?

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