

Inclusivity on Campus: Strategies for Counselors Creating Community for All Students with an  
Emphasis on Muslim College Students

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### Abstract

Recent statistics suggest that the current campus climate across the United States does not fully support inclusivity of students of marginalized groups, as one aspect of student wellness. In this manuscript, the authors review current literature on the experiences of marginalized student groups, focusing on injustices experienced by Muslim students on today's campuses. The authors acknowledge the current collaborative efforts that many college counselors are putting forth to promote a more inclusive campus environment, while also recognizing that marginalization of students is still present on campuses nationwide. Further, the manuscript will address concerns with student wellness in the Muslim student population by highlighting the impact inclusion has on holistic student wellness. In summary, the authors outline opportunities for college counselors to notice the negative impact of injustice on student wellbeing, engage in collaboration focused on creating inclusivity campus-wide, provide diversity education for their campuses, and reflect on their own personal and professional experiences.

*Keywords:* college counselors, inclusivity, Muslim college students

## Introduction

Mental health professionals, as members of an increasingly diverse society, are embedded within a community of differing worldviews, values, ethnicities, lifestyles, races, and perspectives (Sue & Sue, 2013). While a rich diversity in counseling clientele is expected, mental health counselors must continuously increase their awareness concerning those who have endured historical and current oppression as well as the impact that oppression has on holistic community wellness. As renowned authors in the field of mental health counseling and multiculturalism, Sue and Sue (2013), wrote: “Mental health practitioners must realize that racial/ethnic minorities and marginalized groups in our society live under an umbrella of individual, institutional, and cultural forces that often demean them, disadvantage them, and deny them equal access and opportunity” (p. 120). In a similar sentiment and concerning multicultural awareness as it relates to college counseling professionals specifically, Hodges (2001) stated, “For university counseling centers to ignore cultural influences and diversity is not merely shortsighted, it threatens the viability of the profession” (p. 170). Thus, it is imperative that college counselors maintain a keen professional strategy for meeting the diverse needs of diverse students on campus, especially as they face potential oppression and exclusion.

The current article intends to serve as one answer to the call for increased recognition and response to the impact of these cultural forces on the wellbeing of clients and their communities, particularly in the field of college counseling as colleges represent a microcosm of the social fabric of society (Sweet, 2001). Specifically, this manuscript outlines practical approaches to recognition and response to cultural forces of marginalization that negatively impact student wellness, which include: (a) recognizing the negative impact of injustice on wellness, (b) engaging in cross-campus collaboration to create an inclusive community, (c) counselor

education specifically targeted towards college counselors who prepare to work in diverse campus communities, (d) diversity education for the broad campus community, and (e) professional/personal reflection for the purpose of enhancing personal and professional growth as it relates to meeting the needs of all members of the student population. Although many groups are repeatedly oppressed, the unique challenges faced by Muslim college students will serve as the focus of this paper to provide one example of a group who faces unique issues related to inclusivity in today's college campus climate.

Although various student service entities work to resolve the issues of oppression and discrimination on college campuses, the topic remains significant because issues of exclusion and oppression still remain a large problem on college campuses. In response to this problem, a large portion of college counseling centers are already extensively collaborating with other areas of student services. For instance, Brunner, Wallace, Reymann, Sellers, and McCabe (2014), reported that 99.8% of college counseling centers surveyed in their study reported collaborating with other campus departments for the purpose of responding to campus issues related to student experiences of campus exclusion. While numbers do suggest that many do engage in collaboration, specific strategies are lesser known in the current literature. In addition to individual campus-based efforts, professional associations in the field of mental health are also making an effort to address multicultural and social justice concerns. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) has outlined competencies for counselors in order to address concerns of multicultural competence in practice, which emphasize the necessity for counselors engage in ongoing learning and understanding of diversity issues as well as personal reflection on the topics cultural awareness and biases. (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015). Further, the Association for Student Affairs

Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) provides professionals with additional competencies specific to diversity and inclusivity, outlined in their seminal document entitled, *The Final report of the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs* (NASPA, 2010). Despite being provided with these critical competencies, colleges continue to face these issues, which suggests that counselors will benefit from strategic objectives to increase action-oriented responses. Examples of these issues as well as proposed strategies that counselors may find helpful are presented below.

### **Social Injustice and Wellness**

Numerous research investigations highlight the impact of individual, institutional, and other cultural forces that negatively affect an individual's well-being (e.g. Sue & Sue, 2013). This research suggests that individuals are at an increased likelihood of physical and psychological problems due to discrimination and social isolation who identify, or are associated with, specific groups such as (but not limited to): gay and bisexual Latino males, individuals who are overweight, Black lesbian females, Muslim immigrant women, and transgender women of color (Battle & DeFreece, 2014; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012; Lourgos, 2016). Individuals who face discrimination on college campuses are at an increased likelihood of experiencing a number of problems, including more days spent unwell in bed, depression, stress, hypertension, and increased risk of suicide according to Krieger (as cited in Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002). Since the counseling profession places a large emphasis on social justice, wellness, and advocacy, college counselors have a duty to assist in maintaining an inclusive environment on campuses in order to support student wellbeing, particularly for those students who are facing such dire circumstances like discrimination.

In response to Sue and Sue's (2013) call for greater recognition of cultural forces that demean, disadvantage, and deny equal access for members of our community, we first acknowledge the current climate on college campuses pertaining to inclusivity and acceptance of differences. Developing a knowledge base concerning this issue begins with becoming familiar with statistical data pertaining to campus hate crime, thus increasing one's awareness of the pervasiveness of the issue. For example, on-campus hate crimes reported to the United States Department of Education have shown a steady increase in frequency since 2011 (United States Department of Education, n.d.). In the year 2014, there were 1,371 reported hate crimes on campuses throughout the country (United States Department of Education, n.d.). In addition to recent statistical trends, counselors should also become familiar with anecdotal reflections of hate crimes in the United States as well as at their home institution. By doing so, these counselors will have an understanding of how widespread these issues are and know about the extent of problems at their home institution.

For instance, a female student at San Diego State University recently reported being the victim of a robbery, saying that her attackers made comments about her Muslim faith and decision to wear a hijab (Jaschik, 2016). A similar case is under investigation at San Jose State University where a student in a hijab was "grabbed and choked" (Dickerson & Saul, 2016). A group of African-American male students at the University of Pennsylvania were added to a group-messaging chat room where they were threatened with lynching (Lanyon, 2016).

Hate crimes and feelings of oppression have created a rift in the college student population, resulting in an environment where many feel excluded, unwell, and unsafe. College students outside of the majority have increased difficulty in performing to their fullest potential because they do not feel included in their environment. As part of campus health efforts, college

counselors have a mission and obligation to assist students in achieving and maintaining wellness and personal development throughout their college experience (ACCA, 2009). A major part of wellness is mental health, and many mental health problems in minority students originate in a lack of inclusion across campus.

### **Cross-Campus Collaboration**

There are a number of efforts that can support wellness, inclusivity, and an enhanced sense of community for all students that can be amplified when shared across professional disciplines in higher education as well as student organizations. For example, consider first the unique circumstances encountered by Muslim college students, who are facing an alarming influx in attention and hate crimes. As students who practice religions or faith perspectives that are met with suspicion in the United States, they are more likely to face discrimination and prejudice on campus (Dickerson & Saul, 2016; Jaschik, 2016). Specifically, current global issues and subsequent U.S. policies have inspired attention and curiosity about religions rooted in Islam, and has brought heightened awareness of Muslim students in U.S. institutions of higher education (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Further, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, Muslim students, and those who appeared to be Muslim, were the target of a number of discriminating incidents on campuses (Khan, 2012).

As a deeply rooted factor of identity and group belongingness, faith and religion are significantly tied to student wellbeing and self-esteem, and are recognized as increasingly more important to students in more recent generations (Nash, 2001). College counselors as advocates for all students, especially those facing disproportionate levels of discrimination on campus, face an even greater task to create an inclusive non-threatening environment for religious minority students, as they continue to face exclusion and crime on campus (Dickerson & Saul, 2016;

Jaschik, 2016). Khan (2012) emphasizes a current phenomenon as Americans appear to be conflicted in their orientation toward Muslim Americans and Islam, and thus, “Muslim individual self report of anxiety resulting from unpredictability of negative sentiment toward Muslims (e.g., experiences with discrimination or racism) should be validated” (p. 14).

Validation and understanding are, therefore, critical components of response. By forming an effective therapeutic relationship, counselors may directly address the negative impact of oppression with victims in one-on-one, counseling relationships (Khan, 2012).

College counselors can increase professional awareness and personal understanding by becoming familiar with the experiences of Muslim students on their own college campus. As Cole and Ahmadi (2010) underscored in their review of Muslim college student experiences, higher education professionals must first seek to understand the student body’s experience before responding. This can be done through the formation of a group in which dialogue focuses on experiences with oppression or through a campus survey regarding oppression and discrimination. Modeling a sense of curiosity, care, and alliance-building will in turn inform campus relations beyond the counseling center. Efforts beyond the counseling center can be initiated by means of partnering with Muslim/Islamic student organizations such as a local chapter of the Muslim Student Organization. A college counselor’s presence during a chapter meeting or event may instill a sense of trust or alliance building between the mental health practitioners and Muslim students on campus. Showing up is not enough, however, and a listening presence may be more efficient and receptive than a psychoeducational or directive role.

College counselor collaboration does not, in fact, end with student partnerships. As noted, college counselors are heavily involved in collaboration with various campus entities as well,



including student affairs professionals as well as campus administrators. Take the effort to support Muslim students above, for example, which includes multiple opportunities for collaborative relationships for the eager college counselor, and may include: (a) individual counseling relationships with victims of discrimination/hate crimes, (b) psychoeducational-focused relationships with students of a dominant group, (c) collaborative efforts with students of the non-dominant faith group to celebrate their identity with their college community, (d) police and security forces that protect the student body, (e) health and wellness experts that may support student wellness objectives that are inclusive of Muslim traditions and beliefs specific to community health, (f) administrators and faculty who may wish to implement increasingly inclusive efforts across campus and in the classroom, and (g) local community leaders who may model interfaith dialog as well as conflict resolution on their local college campus.

By reaching nearly every area of the campus community, faculty, organizational chart, and student body, college counselors can gain assistance in making every aspect of campus inclusive. For instance, a college counselor may reach out to a faculty member who is teaching freshman-year literature, and organize a educative group conversation amongst students in follow up to reading a text that highlights the personal struggles of Muslim women living in the United States, such as Haddad, Smith, and Moore's (2011) book titled, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. Using group counseling techniques and emphasizing empathic listening skills, college counselors may support students in making meaning of the experiences of otherwise unfamiliar student experiences. Furthermore, the inclusion of members of the Muslim faith community and campus leadership, such as the Dean of Students, may enhance the purpose of these group discussions and model the inclusive nature

of the educational activity. Inclusivity ought to be not only discussed on the campus, but also modeled and practiced by the college counselors organizing collaborative efforts.

### **Counselor Education**

Perhaps one of the most sustainable solutions to this problem begins in counselor education and supervision. Currently, counselor education encourages self-reflection and advancing one's knowledge about diverse groups, which is specified under "Section 2: Professional and Counseling Identity" of the 2016 CACREP standards that emphasizes various facets of social and cultural diversity standards practice and competency (CACREP, 2016). By learning the importance of continuous reflection beyond their graduate programs, counselors-in-training will be better able to facilitate inclusivity and promote wellness in their future work environments. Developing a personal reflective practice that pertains to professional issues of cultural awareness and biases can begin in the classroom, as modeled by the educator, and encouraged by faculty, as they ask students to consider a plan for their own reflective practice beyond graduation. According to current literature pertaining to counselor training, the counselor education curriculum should stress the importance of wellness and multicultural competence beyond one course on diversity, as Collins, Arthur, Brown, and Kennedy (2015) found that graduate students in counseling gained knowledge of awareness of multicultural issues in their diversity courses, but did not develop the counseling skills necessary to begin addressing those issues in practice.

In response to the deficit between knowledge and practice, Collins et al. (2015) argued that development of multicultural competence must be infused throughout the counselor education curriculum. Integrating multicultural competence into the broad curriculum supports students in their ability to feel adequately prepared to work with diverse groups of clients in their

practicum experiences and in their careers. Bringing diverse cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions of counseling students into the classroom may not only model the inclusive approach to counseling, but may also enhance student understanding and empathy for others unlike themselves. Further, tailoring educational material to unique needs of specific counseling fields, including college counseling as well as trauma-informed counseling specific to discrimination and hate crime may enhance this approach. For example, counselor educators may discuss specific efforts for creating an inclusive campus environment through collaboration with other health-care professionals on campus (i.e., campus-based nurses and physicians) in their efforts to promote cross-campus collaboration. As suggested by Mowbray et al. (2006), ensuring continuity of mental health care across campus is a recommended practice in response to the rising need of supportive services on campus, and therefore, counselor educators may prepare counselors-in-training to recognize their role in the web of support services early on in professional training.

### **Diversity Education**

Action in higher education begins with education. Therefore, college counselors can respond to a campus climate that lacks inclusivity by facilitating diversity education programs for the campus community. Higher education research suggests that diversity experiences promote cognitive development in college students (Pascarella et al., 2014). By providing diversity education, which includes the strategic use of educational practices to inform community members of the importance and value of diversity, college counselors work to reduce the likelihood of diversity-related incidents on campus and are bettering the future of larger society. Universities and college campuses are fractions of larger society, which presents implications for both the college student population and society as a whole. If there is a rise in

hate crime off-campus, hate crimes will soon spill into the campus environment. Similarly, if students on campus learn about making their surroundings more inclusive, they will carry that knowledge with them into society following graduation. Without diversity education infused into college student learning, inclusion and minority student wellness will suffer.

The National Education Association (2015) offers a number strategies for exploring and promoting diversity education in a learning environment, which include: (a) Seizing opportunities to learn about people of different backgrounds, cultures and experiences—whether through a book, a film, or a conversation, (b) examining your own attitudes and beliefs about people who are different from you, (c) fostering discussion in your workplace about diversity, (d) assessing the diversity in your school and how students of different backgrounds are faring, and (e) pursuing ways to create diversity awareness or to celebrate diversity in your school community. College counselors may choose to utilize these basic strategies as they fit best with their institutional culture and specific issues regarding inclusion. For example, a counseling center may choose to celebrate diversity amongst counseling staff members by hosting shared mealtime and encouraging all to bring elements of individual staff member-cultures, followed by discussion and experience sharing. Whether a counseling team meeting focused on intrapersonal reflection concerning counselor attitudes and biases, or a joined effort in collaboration with the university assessment office to understand retention and success rates of students who identify as members of nondominant groups, counselors are encouraged to seek multiple avenues for diversity education and reflection.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The following paragraph considers how a college counselor may implement the above strategies. Consider a college counselor working at a medium-sized college counseling center in

the southeast region of the United States. The counselor has recently read about various hate crimes targeting Muslim women on campuses nationwide, and she is concerned about the experiences of Muslim students on her own campus. In utilizing the strategies above, the counselor first seeks statistics from the college administration about religious makeup on campus. Next, she invites Muslim students to complete an intake at the counseling center that discusses their experiences with inclusion discrimination on campus. Through these intake interviews, the counselor finds that, while there have been no crimes on campus, many Muslim students have experienced discrimination and do not feel included nor safe on campus. Following these intakes, the counselor holds a discussion with the other counseling center employees to review the findings of the intakes, discuss an action plan for the campus, and assess their own attitudes and beliefs about this population. Based on the needs of the Muslim students at this college discovered through the counselor's assessment and personal interviews, the counseling center is able to create a counseling group for Muslim students, begin a diversity initiative that combats stereotypes regarding nondominant religions through diversity education, and foster a campus attitude that listens to the concerns of, and includes, Muslim students. These strategies would of course be in collaboration with Muslim student leaders and groups, when possible.

Future research might look specifically at Muslim student perceptions of college counseling and campus climate as it relates to their unique concerns regarding safety and acceptance. Additionally, research in counselor education may explore the inclusion of research and training opportunities specific to counseling in environments where individuals of nondominant cultures are victims of crime.

### **Discussion and Reflection**

The literature referenced throughout stresses the importance of awareness and intentionality in college mental health counselors' response to the needs of an inclusive campus. The awareness of alarming statistics as well as the individual unmet needs on our own campuses may not only inform our strategies as counselors, but inspire our eagerness to serve as advocates for many students who do feel the lack of inclusivity. Through educating ourselves and our campus communities about inclusivity needs, we will inspire reflection and dialog. Further, by means of listening to the many voices in our community and engaging in collaboration across campus, we will intentionally set a tone of inclusion for all students and faculty. Truly leading by example, our role as college counselors is one of great responsibility to the relational climate in our institutions of higher education. In following the strategies suggested throughout this manuscript, and by continuing one's own individual, professional reflection, perhaps college counselors may continue to evolve towards meeting the needs of all students, especially those who feel excluded on campus. As recommended by Smith, Baluch, Bernabei, Robohm, and Sheehy (2003), as part of their application of a social justice framework for college counseling, the intentional cultivation of personal awareness is critical to one's ability to facilitate a just college counseling practice. In the spirit of personal reflection and awareness, the authors of this manuscript suggest the following reflective items to compliment the reader's approach to inclusivity on campus:

1. In the past week, have you engaged in a one-on-one, personal interaction on campus with someone who is a member of an unfamiliar group? If yes, what did you learn from this interaction, and what questions did this interaction inspire? If no, what barriers may be deterring meaningful cross-cultural collaboration on your campus?

2. What does the data concerning discrimination and mental health on your campus reflect about your campus community? According to this data, where are your efforts to enhance inclusivity most needed?
3. How have student perspectives informed the strategies that are in place at your current institution regarding inclusivity? Which perspectives might you be missing from your campus community? How can these strategies be improved/modified to better serve a more diverse campus community?
4. How does the staff at your campus health center promote inclusivity within the department? Which voices are perhaps silenced in the current relational climate, and in what ways might you promote sharing amongst your colleagues in an effort to enhance diversity education?

## **Conclusion**

In closing, the field of college counseling is encouraged to participate in personal reflection and professional dialog on the nature of campus climate issues as well as paths towards wellness for all students. While Muslim college students serve as one example of a student population who experiences a particularly challenging social climate on campus, there remains a plethora of other individual and group needs concerning cultural understanding, acceptance, and safety. As the “changing demographics in the United States require counselors and psychotherapists to integrate cultural and diversity competencies into their work” (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2014, p. 347), counselors are professionally called upon to meet these culturally and societally based challenges. In fact, the American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics declare, “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support or the worth, dignity, potential and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural

context” (p. 3) as a core professional value. Thus, the professional call for cultural competencies and the foundational professional ethics to which counselors abide, emphasize the unique professional obligation of counselors to consider the evolving landscape of individuals whom we serve, especially as the college campus community continues to evolve.



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