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Myth or Reality: Catholic Inclusivity to Students from Other Religions

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MYTH OR REALITY: CATHOLIC INCLUSIVITY TO STUDENTS FROM OTHER RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

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

GOALS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The study explores the case of Saudi Muslim students at Parish University (PU), a Mid-Western catholic research university. Cultural, religious and transitional circumstances that surround the presence of Saudi students on a Catholic institution are examined to reveal factors that might be influencing students' perceptions of the fit between them and the institutional culture. Measures of the institutional community to welcome, orient, and retain Muslim students are also examined to serve as a model of inclusive practice for student affairs administrators at catholic institutions. The view of several stakeholders including: faculty, administrators, student affairs professionals, and the Muslim students themselves would help to evaluate the efficiency of these measures and their adequacy given the complexity of the issue. Utilizing several data collection tools, the study endeavors to find answers for the following questions: 1) How do students feel about their studies at a Catholic institution that is highly assertive about its mission and identity like the University of Dayton campus? 2) What are some mechanisms of inclusiveness practiced by professional and faculty members to increase campus friendliness and inclusivity?

CATHOLIC INCLUSIVITY

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

To Students from Other Religions

However, the case stayed confined in the Christian faith until calls for inclusivity of students from other faiths began to spread early in the 20th century (Garrett, 2006). Hinsdale argued that the Catholic disciplinary tone is a monochromatic form of Anglo-American Catholicism (as cited in Dosen, 2009). Despite these anti-inclusive views, movements have been gradually emerging due to multicultural growth of students at Catholic institutions, as cited in (Dosen, 2009). For instance, the evolvement of Catholic higher education pursuit of heightened global society between the 1960s and 1990s incorporated Islamic studies into their framework (Dosen, 2009). Moreover, as similar student demands increase for a more relevant curriculum, faculty will in turn begin offering courses that address the literature, history, and worldview of those ethnic groups not traditionally represented (Dosen, 2009). Rodden (2012) emphasizes contemporary views on the acceptance of Catholic inclusion declaring what is most crucial is openness to Catholic practice while also exploring the Catholic faith and acknowledging its limitations.

Challenges for Muslim Students

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

As International Students

Similar to other international students at American universities, Saudi international students face several challenges under various categories. Cultural challenges usually include being from a collectivist culture; the difference in behavioral norms between the culture of origin and the host culture (Long, 2005); different patterns

of social interactions; and the extremely open gender relationships when compared to the reserved, or rather restricted, relationships in the countries of origin.

Linguistic challenges constitute a separate category as influencing several dimensions of the Saudi international student on campus including: restricted ability to negotiate roles in the learning processes with peers and with instructors; limited chances in seeking help both from advisors or campus support services; and harder cultural integration process (Chong & Razek, 2014). Such a barrier adds to the alienation of Muslim international students on American campuses. Educational parity is another category of the challenges facing Saudi students especially concerning their needed learning habits (Razek & Coyner, 2013).

At Religious Affiliated Institutions

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

METHODS

Building upon the relationship between the student cultural beliefs and the fit between their entry characteristics and their institution (Razek & Coyner, 2013; Tinto, 1993), this study aimed at examining the integration aspects of the increased presence of Saudi students enrolled in the various academic programs at PU, a Catholic private university. Approved by the Institutional Review Board, the study was developed based upon an initial study that utilized survey data and content analysis. After initial site observations of religious activities and document reviews of admission criteria and recruitment material, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 21 participants. The selection of participation was conducted utilizing Patton (2003) snowball technique. Interviews were transcribed and coded under a preliminary list of codes that were analyzed under several emergent themes Interview transcripts and analytical themes were verified by participants for completeness and validation.

FINDINGS

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

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

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

The cultural sensitive practice includes looking at the Muslim student experience as an essential part of the acculturation process which increases the chances of success. A basic value that Catholic educators need to recognize is the appreciation these students have for basic Catholic values (Schmidtke, 2011). A general understanding of these students' different backgrounds calls for clearly intentional planning for almost every learning experience especially the extracurricular ones as they help in guiding integrating students into the campus community (Razek & Coyner, 2013). Administration may consider offering religious support through providing a prayer room for these students as they need to feel safe while practicing their faith (James & Estanek, 2012). Such initiative provides an added value to the retention process of these students as they need to utilize a spiritual space of their own. This helps the students feel comfortable and feel at home and with no pressure noticed against their faith.

Teaching should be focused on creating an individualized learning experience for each student (Razek, 2014). Professors and instructors should gear their instruction towards meeting the students where they are. Although challenging, such efforts provide the needed help for the students along the road towards their success. Moreover,

highlighting the moral underpinning behind all religions and beliefs opens the minds of students to the common ground among the different (Sammak, 2009).

Programming is the third component of the PU model to help the students achieve their educational goals. At the forefront of positive programs are the non-alcohol related events coinciding with party time on campus. Though not directly targeting Muslim students, these provide safe environment for the students to participate and engage in positive social gatherings as well. Campus programming may also sponsor and publicize special events surrounding Muslim holidays (Razek & Coyner, 2013).

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