

Engendering Immersion for International Low-Income Muslim Students in United States of America: Morgan State University as Case Study

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Abstract

As education becomes more globalized, many universities are welcoming a diverse student body from various cultural and religious backgrounds. International low-income Muslim students, on the other hand, frequently face unique challenges when pursuing higher education abroad. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the barriers that these students face at Morgan State University (MSU) and to propose strategies to improve their immersion experience. MSU can create a more welcoming and supportive educational environment for international low-income Muslim students by addressing their specific needs and fostering an inclusive campus environment.

Keywords: Muslim Students, International Muslim Students, Low Income, Engender, Immersion

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1. Introduction

International student integration provides numerous benefits to academic institutions by encouraging cross-cultural interactions and enriching the learning environment. Nonetheless, students from low-income families and Muslim communities face unique challenges that impact their academic and social experiences. These difficulties can be exacerbated when studying in another country. This paper investigates the distinct needs of international low-income Muslim students at Morgan State University, emphasizing the significance of immersion in their holistic development and academic success.

To create a climate that is accepting and inclusive of students from many backgrounds, Morgan State University must completely include international low-income Muslim students. Due to misconceptions and biases about their race, financial status, religion, and cultural identity, international low-income Muslim students commonly experience prejudice and intolerance. This can hinder their academic and social achievement and cause them to feel alone. Morgan State University can foster an environment that fosters the academic, personal, and academic growth of international low-income Muslim students while also fostering a culture of diversity and inclusivity on campus by addressing these issues and offering assistance catered to their unique needs.

Immersion is a sociological phenomenon that occurs when a minority group develops an affinity for a place of origin. It is personal engagement with a certain set, group, or belief with the sole objective of comprehending why they believe what they do and, as a result, creating a sense of belonging in the environment in which these people find themselves. With an estimated 1.2 billion adherents, or one-fifth of the world's population, Islam is the second-largest religion in the world (Chen et al., 2019; Rabasa, 2004). Muslims are adherents of Islam who see Prophet Mohammed as Allah's messenger and the Quran as their primary source of religious instruction. International low-income Muslims are people who identify as Muslims, who have immigrated from another country, were raised in low-income households, and are enrolled in educational institutions. International low-income Muslims attend Morgan State University, a university that values diversity, together with some other students of other religions and a distinctive intersectionality.

Islam and Muslims are associated with terror and terrorism in the United States, where they are viewed with suspicion. Although the underlying assumptions of these perspectives have many facets, a number of significant characteristics can be identified (Sharweed, n.d.). Although concerted efforts have been made to eradicate it, the September 11 attacks on the United States brought in a new era of anti-Muslim bigotry, criminality, racism, and xenophobia, and occasionally, low-income Muslim overseas students bore the burden of this animosity in significant ways.

The trust and credibility of Islam in the United States have been severely damaged as a result of the horrifying attacks on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers. Inflammatory news commentary, anti-Muslim movies and television shows, and violent acts committed in retaliation against Muslims or individuals who "looked like" Muslims all increased after the attacks. Muslims in the US were affected by a "War on Terror" that was being fought halfway across the globe (Sharweed, n.d.). Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, there has been a significant shift in the political landscape for Muslim communities and groups that are dispersed across the

nation, as well as the vast and diverse institutions that make up the band of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) with significant Muslim populations that stretches from the south to the north (Rabasa, 2004), with Morgan State University serving as a good example.

Due to the ingrained prejudice towards Muslims following the events of September 11, 2001, there is a need to intentionally create an inclusion for foreign low-income Muslim students. This study intends to investigate the level of integration of foreign low-income Muslim students in addition to providing an intervention project to improve their higher education community at Morgan State University.

1.1 Challenges Faced by International Low-Income Muslim Students

International low-income Muslim students encounter a variety of challenges that impact their academic performance, social interactions, and mental health. Some of these challenges include, but are not limited to:

- a. Cultural and Religious Adjustment: Students may struggle to transition to a new cultural and religious context, which affects their overall academic performance and mental health.
- b. Language Barriers: It may be difficult for international students whose first language is not English to fully participate in academic and social activities.
- c. Prejudice and discrimination: International low-income Muslim students may face bias or discrimination as a result of their race, religion, or socioeconomic background, which can lead to feelings of marginalization and loneliness.

2.0 Key Term Definitions

2.1 Immersion

Immersion is the process of adapting into a culture that is not one's own. A nation, a religion, an ethnicity, or a gender can all influence culture. One rationale is that a researcher must leave their comfort zone since only outside of one's familiar surroundings can one truly experience cultural immersion. This could involve doing things that one wouldn't normally do or spending time in "uncomfortable places," or it might simply mean being open to picking up new customs (Lett et al., 2007).

The process of becoming fully immersed in a new phenomenon involves unlearning, learning, and relearning significant values, ethos, and beliefs. It offers a chance to eliminate prejudice, bias, and stereotypes created because of presumptions made about such occurrences in public.

A person's perspective on the world changes when they become immersed in a different culture. Getting a fresh viewpoint on the world is what it is. One could be able to grasp the intricacies of life, gain a fresh perspective on things, or even pick up a new language. Guidelines for a Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies, 2007.

2.1.1 Islam

"Read" (Mostafa, 2006), the first verse of the Holy Qur'an to be revealed, exhorts Muslims to seek knowledge and the sciences. International low-income Muslim students in this context are undergraduate or graduate students who openly declare their devotion to Islam and wish to carry out Islam's command to seek knowledge. They can be freshmen, sophomores, finalists, undergraduate students, or graduate students. These students respect Prophet Muhammad, may Allah (swt) peace be upon him (pbuh), worship the One God in their role as God's supreme messenger (Speck, 1997). They also have a belief in all the prophets who came before Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), as well as the holy texts they left behind, including the Psalms, the Torah, and the Gospel (Zempli & Tripli, 2022). Belief in the Day of Judgement, when all humanity will be compensated for their deeds in this world, is a major component of Islam. Muslims accept both angels and predestination.

2.1.2 An Introduction to Islamic Culture

Islam, which is a statement of obedience to Allah's will and has the literal meaning of "submission," was established on the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Muslims are those who have accepted Islam as their faith. They contend that God and the Prophet Muhammad, who God designated as His chosen representative to spread these teachings among the populace, are the original sources of inspiration for this religious system. They also believe that there is no other authentic God or equal to Allah. The religion of Islam has been practiced for more than 1400 years. The Qur'an, the founding literature of Islam, contains the Prophet's teachings that were revealed to him by Allah.

The Holy Qur'an and Prophetic traditions (hadiths or sayings) are the two main sources from which Islamic culture derives its principles and conceptions. Contradictions exist in how Islamic teachings are applied, but not in Islam itself. Islamic culture is unique in that its foundations come from supernatural sources. Islamic culture is challenging to accurately describe. Despite the fact that Islamic doctrine remains constant and unalterable throughout the Muslim world, the cultures it has influenced nevertheless have a wide range of customs, histories, intellectual pursuits, and creative expression (Mostafa, 2006).

2.1.3 International Low-Income Muslim Students in Morgan State University

All of the Muslim foreign students from low-income backgrounds who were questioned are from diverse

(African, European, and Middle Eastern) backgrounds. The fortunate ones are able to keep their status as students in the United States of America by earning one form of scholarship or another, but their low income requires them to depend on working any type of on-campus employment. They are barred from using Websis, the Morgan Students payment network, for months after missing a tuition payment. While upper-class students are not constrained from working and can, when they do, pursue comparable jobs, they are only allowed to work on-campus and for a maximum of 20 hours per week as international students, which barely covers their basic needs. These show the convergence of a religious, social class, and racial minority conflict that low-income Muslim students face globally. The biggest obstacle for Muslim students from low-income countries is the comparatively high quality of living in the United States. (Gutierrez & coworkers, undated). International students encounter a variety of challenges, including unfamiliar educational systems, foreign food, cultural isolation, and being separated from family and friends (Chen et al., 2019). Due to their international status, they are immediately entitled to all of the aforementioned benefits, but they are also denied those that naturally accrue to native Americans, such as access to government financial aid and the capacity to labor for higher pay and longer hours.

2.1.4 Experiences of International Low-Income Muslim Students at Morgan State University

For students from various backgrounds, especially those who have traditionally been excluded, campus atmosphere continues to be a significant predictor of success in higher education. Researchers who studied the religious climates on college campuses discovered that, in some cases, minoritized religious and nonreligious students experienced lower levels of academic satisfaction because of "Christian privilege" (Nojan, 2023). Worldwide illiterate Muslim students' experiences at Morgan State University are exactly the same as those of Christian students, at least in how the concept of Christian privilege is understood.

3. Methods and Strategies

The answer to the query "What is it like to have a certain experience?" is provided by phenomenology. It aims to comprehend the phenomenon of a lived experience, which may be connected to a relationship, membership in a group or organization, a group, or a negative emotion like depression or loneliness. Every shared experience has a common theme, according to phenomenology's central assumption. It is based on social sciences and necessitates that the researcher dive into the subject's (or group's) private life in order to interpret the subject's (or experience) ((Guidelines for Critical Review Form: Qualitative Studies, 2007), (Lett, et al., 2007) experience.

The core of the philosophical approach and viewpoint known as phenomenology is the investigation of conscious experience and the manner in which objects appear to us in our consciousness. It was developed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century, and it has since had a significant influence on a number of academic disciplines (Sharweed, n.d.).

Without making any assumptions about the outside world or the existence of an external reality, phenomenology aims to explain and examine the structures and contents of subjective experience. It highlights how crucial it is to "bracket"; that is, to put aside preconceived notions, beliefs, and assumptions in order to concentrate on the experience itself.

With the awareness that no results are anticipated, study participants will have the chance to share their own narratives using phenomenology, as previously described (Sharweed, n.d.). In light of this, the phenomenological technique for data collection and analysis best serves the goals of this study. Low-income international Muslim students are a unique but complex phenomenon that frequently navigate Morgan State University.

Research Plan, #4

This study concentrated on the current undergraduate and graduate low-income Muslim immigrant students at Morgan State University. The lecturer for the diversity and multiculturalism course presented the researcher with a list of potential research sites. Through a diversity viewpoint of international low-income Muslims students as opposed to stereotypes, the main objective of this course is to create a more diverse and inclusive campus for international low-income Muslim students. forming a perspective with a well-tilted Islamic lens. This project spans a whole semester of studying how to view people from many perspectives such as sexuality, gender, color, and so on.

The researcher took advantage of opportunities to interact with international low-income Muslim students, particularly on Fridays immediately following Jumaat service. In order to gather the responses from the selected students a Google form was developed as well and distributed. Small sample numbers, according to sociologists, are ideal for the in-depth analysis used in phenomenological investigations. Data will be gathered through one-on-one, in-depth interviews with participants since narrative elements are necessary to fully understand the spectrum of the students' lived experiences.

In qualitative interviews, the focus is on paying attention to and interpreting cues from the participant/informant. In order to elicit as much information as possible in the allotted time, a range of open-ended questions are used. The interviewer frequently has the chance to elicit more information when a participant responds to an open-ended question (Lett et al. 2007).

The participants were asked twenty questions in all. The first five questions were created to elicit demographic data from respondents, and the remaining fifteen semi-structured, open-ended conversational questions were created to help the researcher better understand the level of engagement among international, low-income Muslim students and to immerse her in their personal narratives. The interviewer made it clear that respondents could choose not to respond to any of the questions. They were asked about how they saw their routines at Morgan State University, their experiences in the surrounding area, social situations, etc. The participants were sophomore undergraduates and first- or second-year doctoral students at Morgan State University, in accordance with the study's design. Participants were recruited one-on-one, via email, and by solicitations to current graduate and undergraduate students.

4. Results and Discussion

Muslim students from low-income countries who attended Morgan State University were selected for the interview and questionnaire. The first set of questions was designed to reveal the demographics of the respondents. The second goal was to evaluate the level of bias at Morgan State University, and the third was to verify the effect of student satisfaction with the institution's diversity policies.

4.1 Respondents' Demographics

For the purposes of this study's goals, the researcher spoke with seven students. While 2 students took part in physical interviews that lasted roughly 90 minutes (nearly 1 and a half hours), 7 students—including those who were physically questioned—were contacted via a google form. Both the in-person and virtual interviews used the identical set of questions, but the in-person interview was, as expected, far more in-depth and engaging.

Two (28.5%) of the students interviewed were over the age of 48, followed by four (57.1) who were between the ages of 28 and 37, and one (14.3%) who was between the ages of 18 and 27.

Age

7 responses

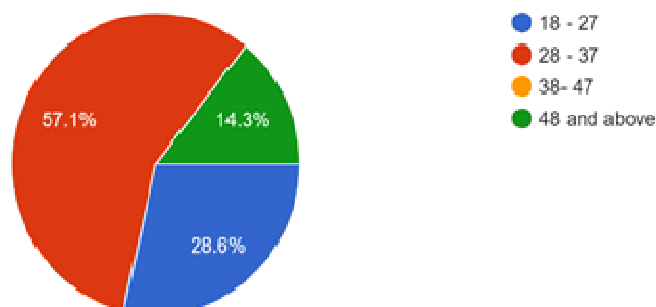


Figure 1 Participants demography by age

Even though some participants did not want to disclose their gender, the participants' gender distribution was largely split between male and female. 3 (42.9%) identified as males, 4 (57.1%) respondents identified as female while the other option and preferred not to answer were both left as 0.

Gender

7 responses

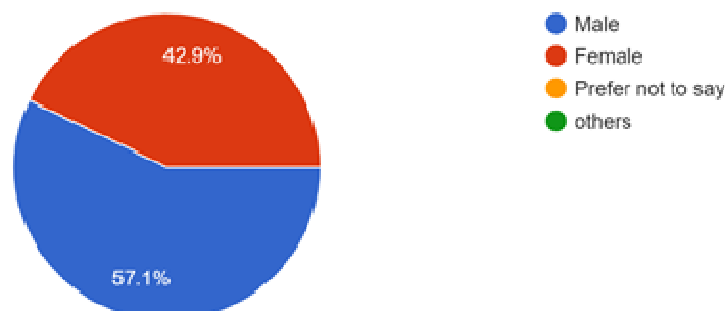


Figure 2: Participants by Gender

The respondents' racial makeup is as follows: One (14.3%) is from NH white, and 2 (57.1%) classified as being of all races and origins.

Race

7 responses

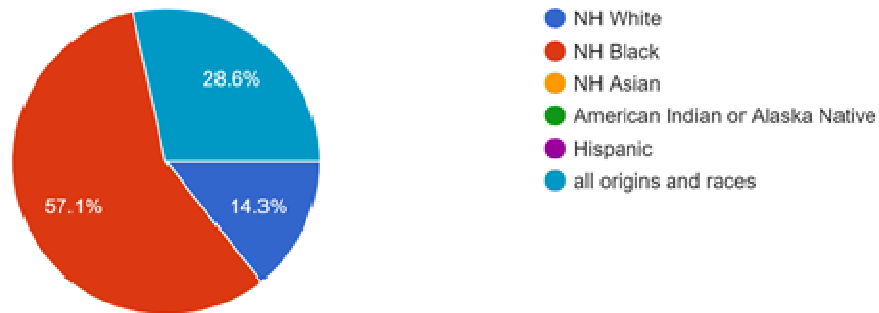


Figure 3: Racial distribution of participants

Participants' program levels were sought after. The results showed that 2 (28.6%) undergraduate students and 5 (71.4%) doctoral students were enrolled in master's programs, respectively.

Program level

7 responses

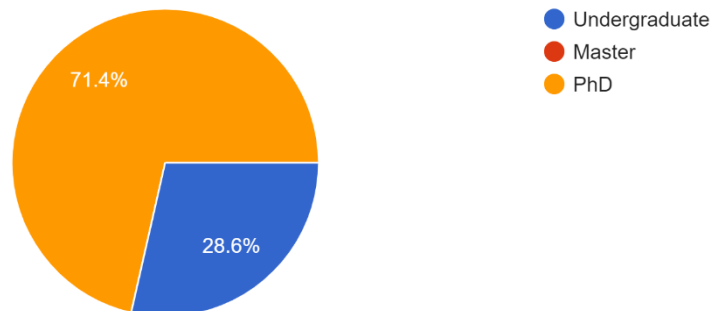


Figure 4: Participants by program

The following findings were obtained after the researcher asked extra questions about the respondents' program information and how acclimated the international low-income Muslim students were: Two (28.5%) students were in their second year of undergraduate study, one (14.3%) was in their first year of doctoral study, one (14.3%) was in their second year of a PhD program, and one (21.6%) was in their third year of a PhD program.

How many years have you been a student of Morgan State University?

7 responses

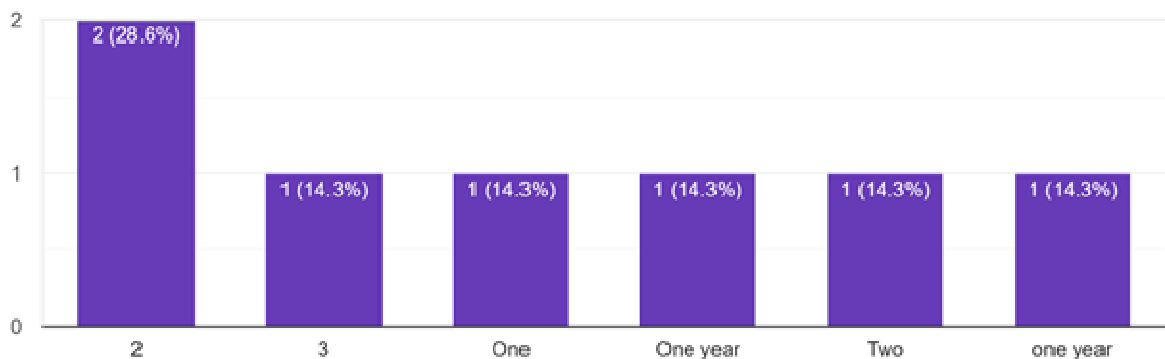


Figure 5: Respondents by year of program/year in Morgan State University

4.2 International Low-Income Muslim Students Engagement Level

The second set of questions was designed to assess Morgan's level of policies and procedures relating to the inclusion of low-income Muslim students internationally. The responses demonstrated that Morgan State

University is an inclusive institution where diversity is protected on purpose and that a small change could further enhance the experiences of the low-income Muslim international students who are practicing Islam and pursuing academic excellence.

To find out if overseas Muslim students from low-income backgrounds face discrimination at Morgan State University, the following questions were posed: Have you have any Morgan friends? If so, what activities do you participate in, whether you're Muslim or not? Which issues do you believe Muslim students at Morgan State University are currently dealing with the most acutely? What are your thoughts on technology? Which do you employ? Do you struggle with speaking or writing English as a second language? What kind of support do you need and where? Are there any places at Morgan that you enter and feel ill at ease? Are there any areas at Morgan that you enter and instantly feel at home? Have you participated in any campus events? The number? They were what? Has someone shown you favor or contempt only because you are a Muslim? Do you believe that Muslims face prejudice at Morgan State University? If so, can you describe a situation? Almost everyone offered a positive response to each of these inquiries of inclusivity in Morgan state University. No one disagreed with the statement that they had never felt uncomfortable anyplace, although a few people did express that they had felt unwelcomed at the students' center, which they attributed to the way other students were dressed there. They claim that although Morgan State University does not appear to have a regulation in place regarding immoral dressing on campus, Islam emphasizes decorum and covering most of the body. While some international Muslim low-income students admitted to taking part in campus social activities, others may not have the luxury of time due to the intense academic workload. There hasn't been any anti-Muslim graffiti anywhere near Morgan, and the university doesn't have any policies that are specifically directed towards Muslim international students from low-income backgrounds During the recently ended month of Ramadan, the administration of Morgan State University sponsored meals at the Mosques for foreign, low-income Muslim students. It was highlighted that this was a particularly admirable move that made the experience of Muslim overseas students from low-income backgrounds meaningful. It was observed that the Morgan staff and student community is generally friendly.

4.3 Improvement of International Low-Income Muslim students' Engagement

The third set of questions sought input on how to enhance the experience of international, low-income Muslim students on campus and included the following: Do you feel satisfied or let down by the mosques or other places of worship at Morgan State University? How has your stay at Morgan affected your religious life? What would you do if you had three chances to enroll in Morgan's intervention programs for Muslim students from low-income countries? There were fascinating responses to these questions. When asked about satisfaction, just two people reacted neutrally, four were displeased, and the rest were extremely dissatisfied. Also, while the majority of respondents indicated Morgan had no effect on their religious lives, some stated Morgan had a negative impact on their religious lives. . The following responses to the question on intervention initiatives that will have the biggest effects on the Muslim student community: Muslim students are given access to prayer rooms in every school building, a mosque that is solely for Muslim students, a tutorial room, information on how to have fun without alcohol and why halal meat is generally superior. Additionally, Muslim students are encouraged to continue practicing their religion and are informed of future events via email. Establishing open access prayer rooms at each campus location (North Campus, Montebello Campus, Main Campus, etc.), beginning short courses, seminars, and workshops on Islamic Education, imparting a fundamental understanding of the true teachings of Islam, expanding the Chapel building to accommodate the increasing number of students on campus, more prayer areas, social activities, and increasing advertising and promotional efforts for the Muslim Student Association, permit designating prayer spaces in each building so that students can pray in welcoming settings.

4.4 Intervention Project Recommendation

One of the inquiries was regarding the main challenges faced by international, low-income Muslim students at Morgan State University, as well as up to three suggestions for potential intervention programs. The two respondents recounted stories of their struggles to locate a mosque for Muslims. Every day, five prayers are required according to the faith of Islam. You must be in an Islamic worship space to offer these prayers. The Campus Chapel is a venue of worship for both Christians and Muslims, as was previously stated; however, only two of the daily required prayers are spoken in the prayer room because it is locked by 5 p.m. This indicates that the first prayer of the day at 5 a.m. and the final two prayers of the evening at 7 and 8 p.m. are held elsewhere. The lack of prayer spaces on campus was brought up by five of the seven respondents, who each asked for one of the following: the construction of a mosque-specific structure, the installation of prayer rooms in every educational facility, additional prayer sites, or the creation of additional prayer access rooms.

4.5 Benchmarking

4.5.1 Howard University

A historically Black college or university (HBCU) in Washington, D.C., named Howard University understood the need of fostering an environment where international students from low-income Muslim backgrounds may practice their religion. As a result, they started working on a plan to give low-income Muslim students abroad access to special prayer rooms.

Choosing ideal campus locations for the construction of prayer rooms is part of the intervention effort. The university administration collaborated extensively with other student organizations and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) to comprehend the unique requirements and preferences of international Muslim low-income students for prayer locations. This cooperation made sure that the prayer spaces satisfied the needs of the Muslim students on campus. After determining the best places to put prayer rooms, the institution spent money on refurbishing and furnishing those spaces. The prayer rooms were constructed to satisfy the spiritual practices and customs of Muslim overseas students from low-income backgrounds. They received prayer mats, copies of the Quran, and other necessities to create a welcoming atmosphere for meditation and prayer.

Howard University also took initiatives to increase student awareness of the availability of these prayer rooms. They disseminated information about the program via several venues, including student newsletters, school announcements, and social media. The university also urged the MSA and administration to regularly contact in order to resolve any disagreements or suggestions regarding the prayer sites.

4.5.2 Florida A & M University

Florida Agriculture and Mechanical University (FAMU), located in Tallahassee, Florida, is another HBCU and one of the largest in the US, with around 10,000 students. FAMU's Muslim Student Association (MSA) worked with university administration to establish a designated prayer space on campus for international low-income Muslim students. The MSA informed the university's Office of Student Affairs about the requirement for a space to pray in order to support the spiritual practices of international Muslim students from low-income backgrounds. In response to this demand, FAMU designated a prayer area for international low-income Muslim students on the third level of the Hansel E. Tookes Student Recreation Center. To create a welcoming setting for prayer and thought, prayer rugs, Quran copies, and other necessities are provided. The Tallahassee Democrat was one of the news outlets that covered the opening of a prayer space at FAMU. The story claims that the institution made a considerable effort to promote diversity and inclusivity on campus by creating a separate area for low-income Muslim international students.

4.5.3 Obafemi Awolowo of University

Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), located in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, is a first-generation institution with approximately 35,000 students and the remaining teachers and staff making up an estimated total enrollment of 41,000. The OAU has two major religions: Christianity and Islam, both of which are well-served. While many church buildings in the religious area were created independently by denominations, the university chapel, All Souls' Chapel, stands out. OAU has a central mosque with 1,000 seats for devout Muslims, as well as prayer rooms in each faculty building so that staff and students can enter, pray, and then resume their work. These are areas within buildings designated for Muslim worship, not actual constructions. Some lecture halls are used for weekly services for Christian students to ensure equal opportunity.

3. Intervention Project: Prayer Space Designation

The designation of prayer spaces is the suggested intervention project for international low-income Muslim students at Morgan State University given that students' experiences at all schools can be compared because they all accommodate racially diverse students despite their historically black campus contexts. This intervention project is benchmarked against Howard, Florida A&M, and Obafemi Awolowo Universities. Racial minority students may become disengaged from the classroom as a result of encounters with prejudice and racial stereotyping, which decreases their opportunities to participate in learning activities like communicating with classmates and professors (Culver et al., 2022). Replication of the successes at HU and OAU is thus encouraged. Simply because, as observed by MSU's foreign low-income Muslim students, using only one location wouldn't accommodate the amount of such students and wouldn't address the accessibility issue. Morgan State University's previous involvement was to provide a single prayer room for Muslim students; What is currently requested is that many prayer places be provided as a better version and an upgrade, similar to Howard University's creation of more spaces, and that prayer rugs/mats, kettles, and other items be provided if excess funds are available. To support the construction of more prayer spaces, Morgan State University should agree to designate one prayer area per school on campus. This will result in increased Muslim student involvement, religious fulfillment, and improved access to their educational environment as well as religious duties. Once a location has been established for prayer, a makeshift fence might be erected to provide kids with a sense of awe, attention, and separation.

Strategies for Promoting Immersion

The following strategies were suggested and highlighted from data collected for promoting immersion of

International low-income Muslim students. They are:

1. Financial Support and Scholarships: To lessen the financial burdens of international low-income Muslim students, MSU should look into options for financial aid and scholarships.
2. Culturally Sensitive Support Services: Establishing support services, such as halal food options, prayer spaces, and counseling services sensitive to cultural norms, that cater to the cultural and religious needs of these students can help to foster a more welcoming campus environment.
3. Orientation Programs: MSU should create thorough orientation programs that are especially created to aid Muslim international students from low-income backgrounds adjust to the academic and social aspects of campus life.
4. Language Assistance: Providing language assistance to students, such as English language classes or language exchange programs, can benefit them and promote better integration.
5. Financial Support and Scholarships: MSU should explore options for providing financial aid and scholarships tailored to international low-income Muslim students to alleviate their financial burdens.

5. Conclusion

Overall, creating a welcoming environment for all students is necessary in order to attract low-income Muslim international students to Morgan State University. Morgan State University must actively seek to cultivate on a bigger scale a culture of diversity and inclusion that benefits the entire campus community, even though it does not promote itself as an exclusive institution. For low-income Muslim overseas students to accomplish this, extra prayer areas must be set aside. To provide foreign low-income Muslim students at Morgan State University with an inclusive and immersive atmosphere, the administration, teachers, and fellow students must collaborate. MSU can empower these students to overcome their unique challenges, excel academically, and enrich the campus community with their diverse perspectives and contributions by implementing the proposed strategies. Accepting diversity and actively working to remove barriers will not only improve the experiences of international low-income Muslim students, but will also improve the overall educational experience at MSU.

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