

# The On-Campus Experiences of Black Muslim Males Attending HBCUs: An Exploratory Study

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*This exploratory study investigates the collegiate experiences and college satisfaction of Black Muslim male undergraduate students who attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). After a review of the literature, only a few studies on religious minorities in college environments have considered the experiences of Muslims, and none of those have had a dedicated focus on Muslim males. The data for this study was collected through semi-structured 1:1 interviews with participants in person, via Skype video chat, and over the phone. Analysis of the data revealed three major themes: (a) lack of accommodations; (b) challenges that strengthened faith; and (c) the value of attending an HBCU. Findings from this study reveal how Black Muslim male students navigate their collegiate experiences while maintaining their religious beliefs. Moreover, this study highlights religion as another necessary dimension of diversity that all institutions should consider. Recommendations for practice in student support services and directions for future research are offered in light of the study findings.*

*Keywords: Muslim, Black Males, Islam, Religious Minorities, and HBCUs*

## Introduction

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Currently, the United States is home to approximately 2.6 million Muslims, a 67% increase since 2001 (Grammich et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that the Muslim population in the United States is already highly educated and considerably diverse. According to Engineer (2001), the growing proportion of the Muslim middle class has fueled their entry into higher education. As collegiate Muslim populations grow, their experiences become more relevant and worthy of exploration.

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## BLACK MUSLIMS MALES AT HBCUs

Roughly 40% of American-born Muslims are African American (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011). Based on her extensive research, Sylviane Diouf (1998) suggests that as many of 40% of slaves taken during the trans-Atlantic slave trade were Muslim, a statistic indicative of a long, but fractured history of African American Muslims in America. However, although African American Muslims represent a sizable portion of the overall Muslim American population, relatively little is known about them. More research studies are needed to explore the attitudes and experiences of this overlooked group.

### Literature Review

#### Diversity Among Black Males

A review of relevant literature on this topic includes research on Black males at HBCUs, Black males at predominately White colleges, and Muslim college students in general. Black male Muslim HBCU students represent such a narrow demographic that previous research on this group is minimal. Therefore, few of the research studies specifically focus on black Muslims, but rather include them along with other religious minority groups.

Black men are not a homogenous group and do not respond the same to campus political climates. Harper and Nichols' (2008) study used focus groups to explore within-group experiences among Black male students at three institutions. Like any other group, Black men were found to exhibit different political beliefs, sexual orientations, and religious backgrounds. Such findings, may be in stark contrast to societal notions of Black males as being a monolithic group.

Expectations of homogeneity are present at HBCUs where the conservative environment discourages students from challenging the status quo in their personal expression and life choices (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Palmer and Wood (2012) refer to the Harper and Gasman study as ground breaking since it challenges HBCUs to reevaluate conservative and exclusive practices (p. 7). Exercising religious freedom is just one example of challenging the status quo, particularly at HBCUs where Christian organizations played significant roles in their founding. Therefore, any expectations of widespread Christian influence at HBCUs are not farfetched. Although Harper and Gasman used interviews and document analysis to explore how Black male students deal with the political climate at HBCUs, neither of the aforementioned studies specifically address religion. Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008), however, do address religion in their exploration of spirituality among Black male HBCU students. In their study, acts of spirituality, such as "read Bible" and "attend church," indicate that at least 11 of 13 participants were presumably Christian. The results also suggest that when Black men are able to capitalize on and embrace their spirituality, they may be more likely to progress through college (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). All of the studies of Black men discussed here use qualitative research, which is better for understanding the experiences and perceptions of a particular group.

#### Challenges Associated with Being a College Student

There are various challenges associated with being a college student that may be more pronounced amongst religious minority students (Small & Bowman, 2011). Although more stereotypical media depictions of college life portray underage drinking, widespread sexual

activity, and highly active social scenes, research suggests that being on a college campus may pose an array of issues, including but not limited to suicidal ideation and spiritual struggles (Fisler et.al, 2009; Peck & Schrut, 1971). Only a few studies have examined the attitudes and experiences of American Muslim college students (see Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Arfken, Ahmed, & Abu-Ras, 2013; Nasir & Al- Amin, 2006).

### **Religious Minorities as an Overlooked Student Demographic**

Bowman and Smedley (2013) refer to religious minorities as the forgotten minority and religion as an overlooked identity. As previously mentioned, there is a lack of research on Muslim college students in general. However, Muslim students are included in research on students labeled as religious minorities. Research on religious minorities is particularly relevant for religion-affiliated institutions. According to Patten and Rice (2009), a significant difference exists in the freshman-to-sophomore retention rates of students who subscribe to the religion affiliated with the school as opposed to those who subscribe to a different religion. The institution Patten and Rice (2009) examined is characterized as conservative Christian. Concurring with these findings, Bowman and Smedley (2013) found that Protestant students were the most satisfied with their college experiences. However, Bowman and Smedley (2013) did not take into account the amount of time spent at religious services or prayer which may have given a more in-depth look at the religious nature of college satisfaction.

Cole and Ahmadi (2010) reported that while there is no significant difference between the satisfaction of Christian and Muslim college students, Christian students report spending more time in prayer and religious service. It remains unclear why Christian students spent more time in prayer and religious service and how these activities impact student success and satisfaction. In contrast, Bowman and Smedley (2013) did not specifically address Muslim students in their study. Instead, independent variables included the following: no religious background or agnostic, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and non-Protestant. Presumably, Muslim students were included in the non-Protestant variable, which is not only a broad category, but also includes other religious affiliations such as Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, Bahai's and other designations.

Cole and Ahmadi (2010) combined qualitative and quantitative methods, while Bowman and Smedley (2013) and Patten and Rice (2009) used quantitative methods to examine how religious affiliation impacts college satisfaction. Muslim students in the Cole and Ahmadi study reported more time spent on activities that focused on diversity, which may have impacted participants' overall college experiences. As the Muslim population in the United States increases, more research will be needed to give voice to the growing Muslim student population in America.

### **Black Male Students at HBCUs**

Research on Black male college students largely focuses on those attending predominately White institutions (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Few studies have addressed the challenges of Black men enrolled at HBCUs (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008). Moreover, evidence has shown that there is a gap in the graduation rates of Black men and women which has remained consistent since the 1940's (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann & Shwed, 2011). As such, more scholarly work on the experiences of Black male students at HBCUs as well as PWIs is

warranted. According to Palmer & Gasman (2008), the social capital provided by the HBCU environment can be attributed to the academic success of African-American males. These findings concur with existing research describing HBCUs as nurturing and supportive. Palmer & Strayhorn (2008) used naturalistic inquiry to explore non-cognitive factors attributed to the success of African-American male students at HBCUs. Though religion is not addressed in their findings, the self-motivation and focus attributed to participants' success can have religious or spiritual roots.

This study seeks to add to the research literature by focusing on Black, Muslim, male students at HBCUs. Few previous studies have addressed race, gender, and religious identities simultaneously. The dearth in the literature is addressed by this exploratory study of the campus experiences of Black Muslim male college students who attend HBCUs.

A study of the campus experiences of Muslim HBCU students is significant for at least two reasons. First, the quality of students' college experiences can affect their educational outcomes. In other words, a student's religious faith and identity may impact college experiences and subsequent educational outcomes. Colleges and universities represent unique environments in that they are places where diversity and pluralism are heralded in theory but not necessarily in practice. Second, the growth of Islam combined with the post 9/11 interest in and hostility toward Muslims (or persons perceived as such) make it an important research topic given the complexities of intergroup dynamics and multiculturalism in the United States.

According to Cole and Ahmadi (2010), "Society's interest in Islam has extended to American university campuses, where Muslim students have likely become more visible as a result" (p. 122). Muslim students and other religious minorities are yet another demographic that higher education practitioners and administrators should consider while developing diverse and inclusive campus environments. The present study seeks to expand the body of research student affairs professionals can use to address the potential needs of Muslim students.

Though this study focuses on American Muslim male students at HBCUs, the researchers intend to use the results of this pilot study to develop a survey of American Muslim student experiences and engagement at four-year institutions of various types to gain a fuller picture of the lives of Muslim college students. Although all HBCU students are not African American, the HBCU experience is relevant to a study of American Muslim students because African Americans represent the largest group of American-born Muslims.

The authors of this study utilize Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) discussion of giving voice as a theoretical framework. In her seminal work, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins discusses the intersectionality of the social categories persons occupy that can add to their oppression (Collins, 2000). In the case of Black Muslim males, being both a member of a racial and religious minority group may carry various negative connotations associated with the dual minority identity. Since the experiences of Black Muslim males are not widely studied, it is important that our study participants discuss the challenges associated with being a religious minority at an HBCU.

### **Methodology**

#### **Role of the Researchers**

A qualitative research design is considered best suited to explore the on-campus experiences of Black Muslim male HBCU students. Due to the absence of literature on the topic, the researchers sought to examine this particular topic in depth. We are unaware of any other

contemporary study that has sought to enlighten the public about Black Muslim male college students. Another benefit of a qualitative research design is that it requires that the researchers involved facilitate data collection without compromising the integrity of the results. Knowingly or unknowingly, all researchers bring some level of bias to a study. For example, the authors of the current study are African American religious minorities who attended HBCUs for their undergraduate education. In order to minimize bias, careful effort was paid to give voice to the participants in the study. In other words, the authors did not let preconceived notions of the study results shape their interpretation of findings of the participants. Rather, the participants themselves determined the importance of various issues based on their own understandings (Collins, 2000). By being Muslim religious minorities ourselves, we felt uniquely positioned to gain the trust of our participants, which is extremely important in terms of the sensitive topic of on-campus experiences.

### **Participant Selection**

The researchers sought fulltime HBCU students who self-identified as Muslim, male and U.S. citizens between the ages of 18–24. The age restriction was used to limit the study to traditional-age students. Since studies suggest that non-traditional students may not be full-time students, often work full-time, and are significantly older than their traditional counterparts, we sought to capture the campus experiences of traditional college students (Eppler & Harju, 1997). The citizenship restriction was used to limit the study to domestic students since we are particularly interested in the experiences of Black Muslim American males for the present study.

In order to recruit students, a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques were employed. The national Muslim Student Association (MSA) website lists four HBCU affiliate chapters. Potential study participants were recruited through the Facebook pages of the MSAs at those four HBCUs. Other prospective participants were contacted via flyers and emails to Muslim students at HBCUs and other Muslim student organizations (at HBCUs) that were not affiliated with the national MSA. Two of the four interviews took place in person on students' respective campuses. The third interview was conducted over the phone, and Skype video chat was utilized for the fourth.

### **Study Participants**

To protect the identities and reputations of the students and institutions involved, pseudonyms are used. Bilal is a student at South Technical University, a public HBCU in a southern city. Dawud is enrolled at Centennial University, a private HBCU in the mid-Atlantic region. Yasin transferred to Bayou State University, a public HBCU in a rural, southern town. He is the son of Ethiopian and Somali immigrants. Nasir attends Mays College, a private HBCU in a southern city. Both Bilal and Dawud are married and each has one child. By coincidence, three of the four participants were sociology majors. For the descriptive table of participants representing four HBCUs with corresponding classifications, institutions, and majors, see Table 1.

*Table 1.* Descriptive Table of Participants Representing Four HBCUs with Corresponding Classifications, Institutions, and Majors

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Classification</b>	<b>Institution (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Major</b>
Bilal	Senior	South Technical University	Math
Nasir	Sophomore	Mays College	Sociology
Dawud	Junior	Centennial University	Sociology
Yasin	Junior	Bayou State University	Sociology

### **Procedures**

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews. Students were interviewed via telephone, Skype video chat, or in-person. The semi-structured interview solicits specific information from participants while allowing the interviewer greater flexibility to explore emerging patterns and themes (Merriam, 2009). Given the relatively limited numbers of Muslim students on each campus, the snowball sampling technique was used as participating students were asked to recommend additional Muslim students for participation in the current study. By asking for referrals, the researchers attempted to reach students who may not be active with the Muslim student organization on their campus. Prior to the interview, students were given an informed consent form to review and sign. All interviews were recorded with the expressed consent of the participants and took place during the spring and summer of 2013. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. IRB approval was initiated and approved at Texas Southern University prior to the start of the call for research participants and the interview process.

Questions were asked on topics such as socio-demographic information, hobbies, health, family, friends, religiosity, campus/community involvement, college satisfaction, campus inclusion of Muslims, Muslim accommodations, Muslim identity, Muslim student and faculty/staff/student interactions, campus knowledge of or about Islam, and the impact of college attendance on faith. The broad range of questions allowed the researchers to obtain an abundance of information on the topic.

### **Data Analysis**

For the qualitative researcher, analysis begins as data is collected. Lichtman's Three Cs process (coding, categorizing, and concepts) was used to analyze the interview data (Lichtman, 2006). The following steps were used during analysis: In step one, coding, we wrote our thoughts and assumptions during the actual interviews and as we read the interview transcripts. In step two, we categorized our thoughts and assumptions into themes while attaching relevant quotes from the transcript to each theme. Finally, in the third step, the themes were further combined into three overriding concepts.

### **Validation**

Each participant was sent an audio file of the interview and a copy of the transcript with instructions to respond back with anything they wish to clarify, expand upon, or change.

Requests were made in an effort to receive participant validation of the researchers interpretation of the raw data. Even after receipt of their audio files, none of the study participants sought to clarify their interviews further. However, it was important that they were all given the opportunity to do so at their discretion. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks the most valuable method for establishing credibility.

The researchers also conducted external audits. External auditors should be unaffiliated with the study and should possess different subjectivities from the researchers. The external auditor for this study was male, non-Muslim, and a student affairs practitioner at a predominately White institution. The main responsibility of the external auditor is to ensure that the findings of the study are supported by the data. The external audit helps diminish researcher bias and provides a general assessment of the study.

### Findings

Analysis of the data revealed three key themes: (a) lack of accommodations; (b) challenges that served to strengthen faith; and (c) the value of attending an HBCU. A discussion of each theme is listed below with a corresponding representative quote from a study participant.

#### Theme 1: Lack of Accommodations

The combination of the lack of accommodations (such as a designated prayer space) and non-pork food options presented challenges for all four study participants at their respective institutions. Two of the four study participants struggled with finding pork free food within campus dining options. Muslims are prohibited from eating pork or foods made with pork byproducts, such as gelatin. Prior to attending Bayou State, Yasin lived at home in Seattle while attending college, therefore, he was not as concerned with the food served on campus. He could always eat at home or off campus if the food did not meet his needs as a Muslim. However, the southern, rural location of Bayou State and Yasin's lack of access to a car severely limited his opportunities to find food off campus. At Bayou State, there were times where the only food option was pork as opposed to a non-pork or vegetarian option. However, he viewed these food challenges as an opportunity to educate others about the dietary needs of Muslims. Yasin discusses how he dealt with a lack of pork-free food options at Bayou State below:

At Bayou, what sometimes would happen is that there'd be, like, nothing but pork or, like, bologna, salami, ham, and I would kind of be like, I'll just hang out, no worries. I kind of, the way I went about it was, you know, people don't know that I don't eat pork. I have to go out and teach them. So it's like I could easily, just easily, get really up in arms about it. Be like, "What the heck? This is really, really dumb. I don't know why they don't see this." But I have to understand as a sociology major that, you know, sometimes people, the exposure that they get is different in different parts of the world. So I can't get upset at them for not knowing. And that was something that we discussed often, and we addressed with student services or whoever the coordinating person at the event was. To just be mindful of those who really don't eat meat or maybe don't eat pork. Because the inclusion, as kind of, like, the inclusion experts on our campus, we want to make sure that everybody has a place at the table.

## BLACK MUSLIMS MALES AT HBCUs

Bilal and Dawud did not discuss challenges with food options, likely because they lived off campus. Nasir, who lived on campus at Mays College, did express his frustrations with the lack of pork-free food options. He stated the following:

It is a challenge sometimes. It has gotten better since freshman year, but I do remember freshman year, sometimes there would be pork in everything and there wouldn't be much for me to choose from in the cafeteria to eat because it was, like, swine in almost everything, but it has gotten better. There have been changes a little bit, but it was horrible freshman year.

Nasir experienced additional challenges during Ramadan, when Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours. Living on campus with a paid meal plan, the only meal option for students is whatever the cafeteria is serving. He stated:

Well, it was during Ramadan. I remember when I came in freshman year, it was like two weeks of Ramadan left, so that's why it's a real problem during Ramadan. We can't eat during the day at the time the cafe is [open], so we had to go in and get some food to carry back to the room. And if there is pork in everything, we are all broke college students so it's like, come on, please!

The availability of a prayer room or interfaith meditation room was important to all four participants. Bilal, Dawud, and Nasir actively worked to have a prayer room on their respective campuses. Only Dawud was actually successful. When asked about how well his institution met the needs of Muslim students, Dawud responded:

I'll tell you this. Centennial hasn't had, Centennial didn't have a prayer room from my understanding in over eight years. For the Muslims or for anyone, whatever you want to call it, interfaith room or whatever, for anyone to pray. There wasn't nothing designated for the Muslims to pray. And we see the chapel. We see, you know, they're using and you know, we see that they, the Christians, the greater Christian majority, have what they need in order to praise their lord. Or praise God, I'll put it like that, praise God. And the Muslims do not have those resources. So when I became the MSA president, this is in my sophomore year now, I fought to get us a prayer room. And I'll tell you, it was not easy at all. It was, it was extremely hard and I put a lot of energy into it, and eventually we did get the prayer room.

Dawud eventually got the Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) involved in requests for a prayer room on campus, which drew criticism from Muslim professors at Centennial:

When I say fought hard, I mean that the school, to answer the question, the school wasn't really open to it at all. Centennial wasn't open for us to have a prayer room at all. We actually called on CAIR [Council for American-Islamic Relations]. Yeah, one of their representatives came and we walked around the campus and she took down a few names, had a little few things. And the very next day, it went around campus like wildfire. I mean, like, every Muslim Centennial professor that I knew then knew about it. And they approached me about it. They said that was a bad move. "You shouldn't have did it." So



## BLACK MUSLIMS MALES AT HBCUs

anyway, um, I put it all down. And you know how some Christians say, “I’m going to let God”? I got to that point where I was like, it’s just not working. But the very next semester, I got an email. And the email had stated that we now have a prayer room for you all. Myself and then two Centennial professors, and then I had to get two students.... We all met up, had a little discussion about the rules and what we wanted for the prayer room to be like. And now we had a prayer room.

The criticism Dawud received from Muslim professors at Centennial exemplifies an extreme form of conservatism even for an HBCU. Perhaps Dawud’s Muslim professors felt that Dawud was being too vocal about securing a prayer room and did not want to be associated with him because of this.

Nasir’s effort to secure a prayer room at Mays College was also controversial. At Mays, the reason given for the lack of a prayer room is that the space could not be for Muslims only. Nasir explains that an interfaith prayer room could be used as an appropriate alternative for Muslims:

Us having a prayer room is the prime example of something they make difficult that is not difficult. I'm like, we don't care what its called as long as we have a place to go to establish salat [Arabic for prayer] on campus. They say we have to call it something else that is more encompassing of other religions, and we don't have a problem with that. They try to say we have to find a space, but there is plenty of room. There might be too much actually, but there is plenty of space on campus that we could use as a prayer room. Centennial has a prayer room, and we've used that to try to motivate them [to give us a room]. You know, we consider ourselves one of the top HBCUs, and Centennial had a prayer room. I definitely would be satisfied with an interfaith room because I know Jews don't pray five times a day. Christians don't make salat five times a day. Muslims make salat five times a day so even if its a multi-purpose, whatever you want to call it, we make salat five times a day, so mostly we are going to be in there the majority of the time. That’s how I feel. You can call it whatever you want to call it.

Bilal tried to establish a prayer room at South Tech, but he was also blocked from doing so. He describes his efforts here:

We were trying to establish different things on campus. The main thing we wanted to get was a prayer room. I will say it was our lack of knowledge of how to get a prayer room. That's first. So, it's not all on South Tech. We tried; I know we spoke with our advisor. We were trying to get a room in the rec center, but we were told it had to be more of a silent room, not just for Muslims. It had to be so anyone could use it. There was a lot about getting it done that we didn't know at first. That's one thing that would be for future generations. I think it would be good for them to have somewhere they can go and make prayer.

Among the improvements Yasin would like to see at Bayou is an interfaith prayer space. “Yeah, so if you’re practicing X, you’re practicing blank, you should have a space, like, to practice as those faiths experience. I don’t think that it’s there. Bayou has a space for a chapel,

but not for anything else.” It must be noted that prayer accommodations are not just physical. Muslims and other religious minorities at public universities should be accommodated in the prayers said during campus events during benediction/invocation. Prayers at these events may be geared more towards Christians than other groups on campus. Yasin describes his conflict with prayers said at Bayou State campus events:

On the Bayou State campus, they’ll do an invocation, right? That’s something they do. And again, they’ll say, In Jesus’ name we pray. For me, it’s like, I can’t clearly like, I can’t do that, you know, being Muslim. So I was just kind of like, “Uh, not exactly.” You know what I mean? It’s part of the Bible Belt, so the majority of people there are going to be Christian. And it’s a very small population of Muslims that are living here. But I went into it thinking to myself, you know, I’m not going to run away or shy away from it because of that. I have a voice. I bring something to the table. And I believe that it deserves to be shared.”

### **Theme 2: Challenges that Strengthened Faith**

Ultimately, the challenges the participants experienced as Muslim students at HBCUs seemed to make them stronger students and Muslims. Overall, the students did not seem to regret their experiences. Bilal describes his experiences as follows. “As far as I see, the different things you encounter, I see as a challenge, but you make the challenge to better you as a person.” Yasin believes his experiences at Bayou have impacted his religious practice and faith for the better. He explains how leaving his West Coast community to attend a southern HBCU was good for his religious perspective:

I think that in detaching myself from the community I was raised in, both the Ethiopian and Somalian community as well as the Muslim community in Seattle, has made me more sensitive to, like, my religious practice. And I am now in the process of just spiritually just minding myself, and my being more about my religion and understanding, and have the questions, and when to go to the mosque and ask my imam [religious leader or person who leads prayer], and things like that. I think it’s impacted it in a way where when I sit down, I just think about who I am and where I come from and all of that. I just recognize that being Muslim is part of that. It’s driven me to just kind of want to know more.

As an American citizen born in Kenya, Yasin is the son of Somali and Ethiopian immigrants. He wants to know more about Islam so he can explain it to persons outside of the Muslim faith. He explains the expectations of discussing Islam with non-Muslims:

So when people ask questions about it, you know, I can’t just be like, “I don’t know.” So now I’m at the point where it’s like I just have to know more about Islam and what it means to be a Muslim.

For Nasir, the temptations of college life and the freedom from parental constraints seems to have made him a better Muslim. He describes how he dealt with the enticements of college life:

I think the college environment almost forces you to know who you are and be sure of who you are and the ideals and principles you identify with because there are a lot of temptations on campus, and they gonna ask you questions and try to test what you're okay with. I feel like the college environment is turning me closer to Islam and wanting to be a better Muslim. I feel like, to an extent, the difficulty in trying to get certain things done as the MSA definitely increases your faith in Islam. I feel like if it was that easy to get certain things, then maybe I wouldn't be as... I mean it forces you to know certain things Islamically, like I had to open up the Qur'an and look up what verse says this or what verse is toward this problem. I had to teach myself certain things.

The challenges Dawud experienced at Centennial made him a stronger person as well. He explains how his experiences strengthened him:

A lot of opportunities opened up for me here at Centennial. A lot of experiences tested my knowledge and my willpower, and I had to always refer to the Qur'an, always refer to the tune of the Prophet [Muhammad]. And, I don't know, if I was somewhere else, I probably wouldn't have to do that. So I definitely advanced their knowledge. I was definitely tested, you know, whether or not I'm a hypocrite, whether I'm saying one thing and doing the other. So it definitely shaped me better to help me be the person I am today.

### **Theme 3: Benefits of Attending an HBCU**

The findings in theme 3 concur with Palmer and Gasman's (2008) research on the impact of social support on the academic success of African-American men at HBCUs. All four participants saw the unique value in attending an HBCU, receiving support and professional connections from faculty. Attending an HBCU opened up career opportunities for both Yasin and Bilal. Yasin explains how attending an HBCU connected him with an internship opportunity:

I now understand the value of an HBCU, in terms of how they can really just get a student encoded. You know, think about what their career options are in terms of dreaming big. I found that when I was going to school in Seattle, there weren't a lot of options, or if there were a lot of options for students like me, then tell us about it. So at Bayou, I've seen things happen in terms of career options, in terms of travel, in terms of interests and opportunities. All of that just opened up like crazy last year for myself. So one of the careers I think I can make right now actually, I'm sitting now on accounts at Princeton, New Jersey, and doing an internship for Educational Testing Services, ETS. And I would not have ever heard of ETS or had ever been introduced to an internship at ETS had I not gone to Bayou State. I would have never known about it, nothing. And that's just one of the experiences that I can say when people ask me what makes an HBCU for a young black person. What makes that experience better for them? What's one of the advantages? I can say, well, this is one. I'm working with a corporation that specifically discusses and tries to tackle the achievement gap in educational inequity. I'm proof of what an education can produce.

Bilal was accepted into a Ph.D. program in math at a prominent mid-western university. Through the connections of his professors at South Tech, Bilal and his wife, also a math major, received funding for graduate study at a mid-western university. Bilal stated the following to illustrate his point:

At a big university, you know, you don't actually get the personal attention of professors. So that's why my brother, he went to Centennial, and when I was asking him should I go to the University of Houston and he was telling me, at an HBCU you'll get the personal attention and you will have quality professors. It's been a blessing that our math department is top quality and they were able to make connections as far as making things happen for us [he and his wife].

### **Discussion**

This study sought to examine the experiences of Black Muslim male college students who attend HBCUs in the United States. Most research on Muslims and religious issues among college students focuses on those at predominately White institutions (Kolchakian & Sears Jr., 1999). This study also highlights the importance of studying Black Muslims at HBCUs since they are a population that has not been considered in previous studies of Black males in higher education. Also, this study adds to the literature on Muslim college students by focusing on HBCUs students as well as Black students. Previous research on Muslim college students has largely not addressed HBCUs or has not singled out Black students. Furthermore, the findings of this study concur with research conducted by Palmer and Gasman (2008) by highlighting the benefits of attending an HBCU. The findings also concur with Harper and Gasman (2008) by highlighting how HBCUs may restrict and exclude students from exploring or expressing their beliefs. As HBCUs increasingly address diversity, religion cannot be omitted from attempts to create inclusive campus environments.

The participants in this study were raised in the Islamic faith and their immediate families were Muslim. It must be noted that the experiences of converts to Islam might be different. The students in the current study represent a double minority since they are both Black and Muslim. Unfortunately, being a Black male has negative connotations in American society and so does being Muslim. The results of the current exploratory study indicate that despite the odds, Black Muslim male students can and do thrive in the midst of adversity, even if these hurdles are caused and implemented by persons of their own racial background.

### **Limitations**

One of the major limitations of the current study is the sample size. Despite contacting many Muslim students at HBCUs via social media and email, only four participants agreed to participate in the study and met the qualifications for inclusion. Despite gaining a wealth of information from the interviews conducted, it would have been even more advantageous to interview a greater number of students if given the chance and opportunity. Additionally, study participants did not respond to member check requests. Therefore, the researchers had to rely on external audits and detailed descriptions to establish credibility.

Participants were U.S. citizens and were raised in the United States. Thus, the current study does not address Muslim male international students' experiences, which may or may not

be fundamentally different from their Black American counterparts. It is quite plausible that those students who agreed to participate in our study were more comfortable talking about Islam than their Muslim counterparts who did not participate. Furthermore, none of the participants were athletes or members of a fraternity. Sports and Greek life are, arguably, key characteristics in a discussion of Black, male college students. Despite the limitations of the given study, we suggest the findings presented will provide a greater understanding of Black Muslim male students at HBCUs and represent a unique contribution to the literature. Furthermore, future research studies are needed to address the significant and timely topic of Muslim religious minorities in higher education.

### **Future Research**

There is a limited amount of research on Muslims and other religious minorities in higher education. Research on students in higher education should reflect the religious diversity of the United States and of colleges and universities in general. Future research should explore the experiences of Muslim students at both predominately White institutions and HBCUs. The experiences of female Muslim students at HBCUs and Muslim students at predominately White institutions should also be examined. There is a plethora of possible studies of religious minorities in higher education, especially those that focus on the faith of Islam. Although it was beyond the scope of our current study, further studies may specifically focus on discussions surrounding religion in the classroom, faculty interaction with Muslim students, and the campus residential life of students with roommates of different faith backgrounds. Perhaps the current study could be replicated with other collegiate religious minority students, such as agnostic/atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and other relevant faith groups. Last but certainly not least, acknowledging that religion and spirituality are not exactly the same, further research should also explore how the role of spirituality among Black male college students may differ by religious affiliation.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Prayer rooms are in demand for Muslim college students seeking to maintain their Islamic identity on campus. Since attending the congregational Friday prayer is mandatory for Muslim males, this may be part of the reason our study participants emphasized the importance of a prayer room during their respective interviews. Many college and university campuses across the United States have multi-faith prayer rooms, including but not limited to Boston College, Oberlin College, Rutgers University, and St. Anselm College. These rooms can also be used by religious majority and minority groups or individuals for religious study, reflection, and meditation and may provide a welcomed break from the hustle and bustle of campus life. Next, the current study found that campuses should evaluate food selections in dining facilities and catered campus events. The inability to find food based on one's dietary restrictions may prove to be a major challenge for Muslim college students. Furthermore, this problem may be compounded if the academic year falls during the month of Ramadan, when able-bodied Muslims fast from food and drink from pre-dawn to sunset. Depending on the cafeteria hours, Muslim students who observe the fast during Ramadan may have to find alternative avenues for food. This may be especially challenging for Muslim students who have paid for the meal plan

but lack the economic resources to pay for take-out food separate from their meal plan in order to break their fast.

Finally, the Muslim students in our study suggest that despite the challenges, there are many benefits to attending an HBCU. However, HBCUs should expressly address religion and spirituality in order to create pluralistic, multi-faith campuses. Bonner (2012) encourages HBCUs to religiously engage Black male millennials like the participants in this study. Offices of Student Affairs should work with Muslim Students Associations and other campus organizations to include interfaith activities on campus that allow for the inclusion of Muslim students. Cultural and religious sensitivity can also be promoted by supporting student participation in Muslim activities such as fasting or wearing hijab. Muslim student associations are largely successful in holding campus fast-a-thons and hijab-for-a-day activities, which allow other students to walk in the footsteps of Muslim students even if just for a brief moment. Although HBCUs may be fairly homogenous and serve primarily Black Christian students, the within-group racial diversity present at HBCUs creates valuable opportunities for learning in and outside of the classroom. The present study suggests that if campuses become more pluralistic, this can have positive benefits on several parties involved and potentially create an environment conducive to education and diversity.

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