ABSTRACT

CERBO, TONI. Muslim Undergraduate Women: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived-Experience of Identity Development. (Under the direction of Dr. Joy Gaston-Gayles.)

Through the analysis of qualitative data, this exploratory phenomenological study investigated the lived college experiences of late adolescent Muslim women to gain an understanding of how they negotiate cross-cultural interactions and develop, understand, assert, and maintain personal and social identities. The research draws on data gathered from two semi-structured interviews with seven female Muslim undergraduates attending a public institution in the Southeastern United States. The interviews were supplemented by two identity maps (self-pictorial representations) and document analysis related to the campus community, social climate of the United States, and Muslim culture.

Using symbolic interactionism and the multiple dimensions of identity model as a conceptual framework, this study provides rich descriptions of the participants’ identity negotiation, interpersonal interactions, and sense of belonging within a changing psychological, social and historical context. A first step towards understanding this student population, the findings confirm and add new dimensions to existing research on identity development by detailing how female Muslim students construct identity within different oppressed social statuses. Based on student perceptions, the findings of this phenomenological study suggest (1) exploration and commitment to personal beliefs, values, and goals are important elements of identity development, (2) one identity is inefficient for describing female Muslims as multiple aspects of their identity cannot be understood in
isolation, and (3) students use a religious interpretative lens to make meaning of self, their interactions with others, and sense of belonging.

Results show more similarities among the participants than differences when it came to their reflections on the nature of social interactions and the multiple aspects of their identity, specifically ethnicity, gender and religion. From the students’ perspectives, the findings affirm the identity development and symbolic interactionism literature while partially contradicting the multiple dimensions of identity model. Based on the findings, the author recommends that higher education professionals pay attention to the complex and shifting identity negotiations of this population and consider holistic student development to intentionally foster awareness and sensitivity to others; safe, inclusive campus environments; and preparedness for engagement with a pluralistic society.
Muslim Undergraduate Women: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived-Experience of Identity Development

by

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DEDICATION

To my partner, my best friend, my eternal companion for his encouragement, patience and belief in me and especially his endless love and devotion.

You bring sunshine and joy to my life.

I bless the day in which we met for without you, my life would be incomplete.

I love you today, tomorrow and always.

To my loving parents for teaching me to work hard and follow my passions.

Thank you for being such wonderful parents.

You are shining examples of strength, integrity and compassion.

Your spirit will always be a part of me and I am so very proud to be your daughter.
BIOGRAPHY

Toni Cerbo received a Bachelor of Art degree in Fine Art from Stockton State College and Kansas State University awarded her a Master of Science in Youth Development. Prior to working in Student Affairs, Toni spent more than 10 years in marketing and communications. Honoring her position as a student advisor and mentor, her interests include student development theory, multicultural awareness and appreciation, leadership development, and community engagement.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is changing. College campuses are becoming more pluralistic as enrollments of minority and female students significantly increase (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2006). As Muslim women become more visible on college campuses, higher education must be equipped to facilitate their growth and development. Establishing a clear and definite identity is a major developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). Understanding the identity of any individual is a complicated task. The transition to college occurs as young women continue their search for who they are and how they fit into the world around them. College experiences may challenge the self-concepts they bring to college. At the same time, they are developing new relationships and reconfiguring existing relationships to maintain their need for support and connection. Therefore, this phenomenological study aims to gain an understanding of identity negotiation among undergraduate Muslim women through the lens of symbolic interactionism and the multiple dimensions of identity model.

A social-psychology perspective, symbolic interactionism emphasizes meaning, interaction, and interpretation of social exchanges in an effort to understand human behavior (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). The multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) suggests that individuals have layers of identity with the most significant personal attributes and characteristics as most essential. This model takes a more holistic approach to identity development by considering
the dynamics of the various contexts in which identity occurs. Although a great deal of research exists on student development, few studies have explored the identity development process among late adolescent Muslim women in the United States. To address this gap in our knowledge this study examines how Muslim women negotiate identity during their college experiences. In post 9/11 U.S. society, understanding the process of identity development and maintenance for Muslim women will provide guidance for higher education professionals. This research is important because it is essential to understand how identities come into play during social interactions and explorations in and out of the classroom, as well as on and off campus.

**Statement of the Problem**

Islam is growing in America. While there are an estimated 1.3 billion Muslims throughout the world (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007), Muslim communities within the United States are increasing in number and becoming more visible throughout American society (Barazangi, 2004). Muslims come from all over the world bringing different cultures, experiences and worldviews with them. “Muslims living in North America today comprise the most diverse population in the history of Islam” (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006, p. 4). Coming from different nationalities, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, Muslims represent a spectrum of world languages, educational backgrounds, cultural customs and traditions, and ways of expressing their faith. Afridi (2001) states, “Between five to eight million Muslims make America their home” (p. 2) making the U.S. the most ethnically diverse community of Muslims in the world. However, “the vast diversity of Islam and of mainstream moderate
Muslims has been overshadowed and obscured by political extremists” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. 4).

The cataclysmic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had an immediate and overwhelming affect on many Americans. Watching these events unfold filled many with shock, disbelief and horror. In the wake of this horrific event, many Americans who knew very little about Muslims began to view these individuals in their communities with fear and distrust (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). The confusion, blame, and anger directed toward Muslims led to feelings of isolation among this group (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2007, 2008). Muslim women, especially those who visibly connect themselves to Islam by wearing the hijab (head covering or Muslim style of dress for modesty and privacy), suffered harassment, discrimination, and violence (Haddad, et al., 2006). As patriotic fervor increased among many Americans, Muslims were alienated and Muslim women, in particular, were further marginalized by the events of 9/11 (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). Subsequently, Muslim youth confronted many ethnic, cultural and psychological challenges as they tried to navigate the development of their identities throughout this historic time (Sirin & Fine, 2007, 2008).

September 11, 2001, painted a negative picture of Muslims around the globe. A 2006 USA Today/Gallup poll found a substantial number of Americans (66%) admitted to harboring at least some prejudice against Muslims (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. x). One in five Americans disclosed strong anti-Muslim feelings, almost half distrusted Muslims and one
quarter preferred to not have a Muslim neighbor (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Furthermore, a majority of Americans still say they know virtually nothing about Muslim views and beliefs (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Influenced by deep-rooted assumptions, public opinion generally ignores the diversity of the Muslim culture (Afridi, 2001; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). The substantial amount of misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and misperceptions about this group intensified the repercussions for many Muslims living in the United States (Suarez-Orozco, 2008). In the absence of personal contact with the American Muslim population, fears and hostilities became exacerbated.

Without an understanding of this population, Americans may continue to marginalize Muslims and isolate them within their Muslim communities. As these Muslim communities become more visible on American college campuses, institutions charged with admission of diverse populations, learning and educating about the lives of Muslim women brings higher education administrators closer to developing a multicultural campus and a true sense of belonging and inclusion. According to van Manen (1990), the descriptions of lives of individuals provide insights and understanding of the lives of particular students. Knowing more about Muslim women, the realm of academia can learn about the nature of their multifaceted educational and personal development.

Such development when defined in relation to other family members, women’s rights, freedoms, and roles vary throughout the Muslim community. Differences in Muslim and American cultural values and beliefs also present challenges to acculturation for Muslim women. Al-Ma’seb (2006) found that Arab Muslim women remain strongly embedded in
their cultural values and do not fully acculturate to American society. According to Semaan (2007), individual’s country of origin affects in-group socializing, perceptions of discrimination, and attitude toward American culture. Gunel (2007) found that Muslim girls become socially isolated and alienated in school because of conflict and cultural differences, as well as American’s lack of knowledge and understanding of Muslim cultural norms and language limitations. Conversely, trying to balance integration with personal beliefs and aspirations, the Muslim women in the Raouda (2006) study were resilient and demonstrated personal empowerment to contradict societal stereotypes. While displaying different cultural values, these women placed emphasis on the importance of family and faith.

Family relationships and gender role expectations also influence Muslim women’s identity negotiation. Exploring ethnic and religious identity development, Ajrouch (2004) found that second-generation Arab American adolescents clearly differentiate themselves from white America. Largely informed by cultural norms, young Arab women perceive American values as morally suspect and not in agreement with Islamic ideals of appropriate behavior. “For the Arab American adolescents in this study, restrictions on girls are justified because girls are defined as valuable and important, in need of protection” (Ajrouch, 2004, p. 387). Thus, varying cultural beliefs can cause problems for female Muslim students.

Conforming to majority cultural norms may present challenges to their cultural values. In researching the process of gaining independence for adolescent Arab Muslim girls, Eisenlohr (1996) found that the structure of American high school presents additional stress. The co-ed nature of school may violate parents’ expectations for interactions with
boys and limit an Arab Muslim girl from gaining the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities. Additionally, dissonance between parents and the administration or parents and their children might prohibit Arab Muslim girls from feeling positively about themselves (Eisenlohr, 1996). Gunel (2007), found that lack of trust, conflict, and cultural differences contribute to Muslim girls’ discomfort inside and outside the classroom.

Still today, in America’s hegemonist society, formal institutions, social relationships and the media present challenges to the social identity of Muslims. Sirin and Fine (2007, 2008) attempted to understand how Muslim youth establish identity under increased suspicion. They found some young Muslims suffer humiliation and mistreatment while others reject discrimination and work to educate people about their religious culture. In addition, males and females negotiate their identities in different ways (Sirin & Fine, 2007, 2008). Confusion arises and problems occur when changes happen in an individual’s beliefs and/or values. Muslim boys struggle with the perceived fragmentation of their identities, displaying more anger and frustration as they try to integrate both cultures. On the other hand, Muslim girls have gained new freedom seeing their lives as more fluid and interweaving both cultural identities.

Muslim adolescents that learn to navigate American culture and that of their parents will undoubtedly benefit from both worlds. However, current research in the field of student development provides a limited understanding of the identity development of Muslim college students. Speck (1997) found that misrepresentations and lack of respect of cultural differences and religious practices negatively influence the educational experiences of
Muslim students. Collecting data prior to September 11, 2001, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) examined the college experiences of Muslim female students. Investigating the possible influence of college on the religious practice of wearing the veil, six salient themes emerged: “being a good Muslim, a Muslim identity, stereotypes and misconceptions, social reinforcement, modesty without the veil, and religious obligation” (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, p. 54). Their findings suggest that peer interactions have the most influence on students’ feeling of alienation or acceptance. Looking to gain a better understanding of social theory regarding religious, ethnic and gender identity in response to crisis of Muslim university students in New York and Colorado, Peek (2003, 2005a) found asserting religious identity is a powerful base of personal identification and collective association for Muslim youth.

Therefore, as the Muslim population within the United States continues to grow, higher education administrators need to know how to provide the appropriate educational and developmental tools and programs to enable Muslim females to explore and establish their identity. With scant research on the identity development of Muslim women, this area warrants increased scholarly attention. Despite the wide variety within the Muslim population, cultural identity is fluid, as youth struggle with the complex dimensions of selfhood, including hopes, values, beliefs, gender, race, religiosity, and community (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Integration for members of various cultures requires engagement with a pluralistic society. Such pluralism and diverse social constructs naturally finds fertile ground on college campuses. Still, it is not easy, even under the best of circumstances, to create learning and living environments that incorporate the optimal balance of challenges and
supports for every student. For that reason, this study examines how Muslim females navigate their social interactions and negotiate perceptions of self as college students.

**Purpose of the Study**

By representing experiences symbolically, individuals can engage in self-reflection and evaluation, essentially becoming agents of their own development (Blumer, 1969). Resulting from subjective perceptions, external social characteristics and reflection, identity pertains to an individual’s sense of self and group affiliations. Therefore, it is important to consider academic and social integration as equally important aspects of the college experience (Tinto, 1993). Exploring the lived experience of identity development, this study aims to connect personal narratives with sociocultural context to examine how the social and academic environments influence the changing personal and social identification of female Muslim students. However, to understand the complexities of identity development for female Muslim undergraduates we must also consider the psychological, social, and historical context of American society.

Tying the experiences of marginalized groups to sociocultural histories will further illuminate the intersecting nature of multiple identities. While psychosocial development theories (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966) have greatly advanced our understanding of identity development, research often fails to include minority students in samples resulting in skewed developmental patterns. Within the United States, there are limited numbers of empirical studies published that focus on Muslim youth (Sirin & Fine, 2007, 2008). There are even fewer that look
specifically at the college experiences of Muslim women (Ajrouch, 2004; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2003, 2005a; Speck, 1997). In the aftermath of 9/11, it is increasingly important to learn how Muslim women deal with challenges to their identity, especially with increased media attention surrounding Islam and the Muslim culture.

According to Gohn and Albin (2006), what has occurred or is occurring within a society shapes youth. Institutions of higher education often reflect societal social patterns that have the potential to influence and shape daily experiences. Since identity exploration occurs throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood, the college years offer an ideal opportunity to examine the phenomenon of identity development. Specifically, through the analysis of qualitative data, this phenomenological study explores the lived college experiences of identity construction for late adolescent Muslim women. Of particular importance is the notion of identity salience, which recognizes the factors that make one facet of identity more essential than other aspects. Therefore, this study contributes to the discussion of the multiple facets of female Muslim social identities, specifically ethnicity, gender, and religion.

**Research Question**

The body of knowledge on the experiences of Muslims continues to grow; however, few empirical investigations explore the identity development of Muslim women. In trying to discover the nature or essence of identity development for traditional college-age Muslim women, this research draws on data gathered through individual interviews. The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of how Muslim women negotiate social interactions, deal
with conflict and gain a sense of self during their college education. The main research question for this study is what is the nature of identity development during college for late adolescent Muslim female students?

**Conceptual Framework**

In this investigation, symbolic interactionism and the multiple dimensions of identity model serve as the framework through which to view the identity development experiences of female Muslim students. A central part of the research process, the conceptual framework provides a way of looking at the world and making sense of it (Creswell, 2007). Drawing from the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism, this research investigates identity negotiation within a changing psychological, social, and historical context.

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) views people’s selves as intentional and creative social products. Meanings individuals attribute to objects and events influence how they behave towards them. Symbolic integrationists study how individuals use and interpret these meanings to communicate and interact with one another (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). Using symbolic interactionism within educational research, specifically student descriptions of their experiences, illustrates how meanings of experiences and identities are socially constructed.

Likewise, using the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), acknowledges the different aspects of identity and examines the internal and external contextual influences that affect identity development. Due to the vast ethnic diversity within the Muslim population and the many different interpretations of the
Qur’an, it becomes important to examine late adolescent female Muslims’ abilities to create and hold ethnic, gender and religious self-conceptions amidst different changing contextual and environmental factors. Recognizing identity development as dynamic, fluid, and complex, the multiple dimensions of identity model may help clarify how these women construct, assert and maintain their identity across these multiple contexts. More importantly, this model “shows how identity can be understood and experienced differently at different points in time, particularly in relation to one’s personal identity and in terms of relative salience of each dimension” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 411-412).

**Rationale for Qualitative Studies**

Current research in the field of student development provides a limited understanding of the lived experiences of late adolescent Muslim students. Therefore, the focus of this
exploratory dissertation study is to gain an understanding of how Muslim women negotiate identity during college. Agreeing that reality is socially constructed and following the constructivist paradigm, I employed a qualitative research design. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers recognize that individuals socially construct meaning as they interact with their world. With the vast diversity within the Muslim culture, the research may show multiple realities.

The multiple realities constructed by individuals have implications for their lives and social interactions with others (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), different people experience phenomenon differently in any given context. Krathwohl (1998) states that “qualitative research methods are particularly useful in understanding how individuals understand their world, in showing how individuals’ perceptions and intentions in situations determine their behavior, in exploring phenomena to find explanations, and in providing concrete and detailed illustrations of phenomena” (p. 225). Even though all participants in this study are Muslim, their experiences are diverse because of differences in ethnic, cultural, and family backgrounds, as well a previous life experiences.

With a goal of understanding these multiple realities, I employed a phenomenological inquiry. Focusing on the individual lived experience of each participant, I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews, identity maps (self-pictorial representations), and document analysis to collect the personal story and meaning of each participant’s college experience. These methods are consistent with the interpretive phenomenological perspective. Van Manen (1990) suggested allowing individuals descriptions of their experiences to speak for
themselves, as the details of lived experiences are already meaningful. Concentrating on this concept, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of participants’ lived experiences in order to provide the readers rich descriptions of what they experience and how they make meaning of these experiences in the negotiation of identity during college.

**Subjectivity Statement**

My personal experiences in higher education administration prompted the current study. From the perspective of a higher education professional, I have witnessed the urgency of understanding the lives of all students and the importance of empowering students of all races, ethnicities, religions, genders, sociocultural backgrounds, etc. According to van Manen (1990), the researcher should acknowledge their assumptions and suppositions prior to beginning an investigation. “The problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (van Manen, 1990, p.46). As an American woman of Italian decent, I have limited first-hand knowledge of the Muslim culture. However, rather than viewing my personal perspectives as a bias, they should be viewed as a strength.

Prior to working on this project, I conducted a pilot study involving four Muslim female undergraduates. While the pilot study focused on their understanding of campus climates, it indicated there were greater issues involving sense of self. Enthusiastic that I was interested in hearing about their lived experiences, the pilot study participants shared cultural tensions, fears, personal values and beliefs that prompted more issues of interest on identity
development. Thus, the pilot study encouraged me to research the multiple aspects of their identity and explore their personal knowledge and college experiences.

Furthermore, while I worked as a student affairs administrator, I encountered many students from a wide variety of cultures, countries, and religious backgrounds. I found great joy in being able to educate these students, as well as learn from them. Whether doctoral or undergraduate, my participants and I were still students learning from students in our common collegiate world. Similarly to listening and learning from the pilot study participants and because I viewed this study in the same manner, I used a reflective journal to record information from the beginning processes of gaining Institutional Review Board approval through member checking and other methods to ensure trustworthiness. A reflective approach enabled me to examine personal assumptions and influential factors that had the potential to affect the results, as well as create transparency in the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Additionally, the qualitative research method of phenomenology also presents challenges if the researcher does not make every effort to minimize bias. Because phenomenology aims to present the essence of the lived experience of individuals, the researcher must acknowledge and defer personal judgments while presenting the realities of the study participants (Creswell, 2007).

**Significance for Higher Education**

The significance of this study lies in the exploration and interpretation of students’ perceptions regarding social interactions. After the dramatic events of 9/11, more and more researchers are conducting studies on the beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and experiences
of Muslims in America (Al-Ma’seb, 2006; Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Gunel, 2007; Haddad, 2004; Haddad, et. al., 2006; Kopp, 2002; Leonard, 2003; Moore, 2002; Peek, 2003, 2005, 2005a; Raouda, 2006; Semaan, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2007, 2008). While most of this research is narrowly focused on specific aspects of Muslim culture, I have found few studies on Muslim women and their college experiences. Moreover, few empirical investigations have explored the identity development process among late adolescent Muslim women in the United States. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in our knowledge. In particular, this research focuses on the development, maintenance and negotiation of their ethnic, gender, and religious identities during college.

Another significant reason to learn about this population is that citizenship is critical in ensuring a sense of belonging. Leaving student engagement and multicultural learning to chance encounters, college campuses fail to incorporate diversity into all aspects of the educational experience (Hurtado, 2008). Sanford (1966, 1967) emphasized the importance of assessing student readiness and balancing challenge with support in the college environment. Since 9/11, the Muslim community is under increased scrutiny and student perceptions of unfairness might affect their sense of belonging and engagement in curricular and co-curricular activities. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), individual perceptions highlight the role institutional power plays in preserving White domination and subordination based on culture, race, class, gender and religion. Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) suggest that involving colleges, or campuses that provide rich co-curricular learning experiences, promote the best environment for student learning and development. Therefore,
supporting student development requires deliberately creating conditions that allow students to engage in cultural experiences and enhance multicultural competencies for effective citizenship in a diverse society (Harper, 2008).

More importantly, this research is significant from a social justice point of view. In the twenty-first century, campus environments that prepare students for a world of interconnectedness and diversity are essential. However, more than bringing students of various racial and cultural groups together, institutions must ensure an appreciation of these various populations to foster a sense of belonging to all students. Cheng and Zhao (2006) found that institutions that provide opportunities to interact with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds increase student satisfaction and maximize learning in multicultural competence. Therefore, establishing environments that allow students to engage in collaborative social relations with diverse others are crucial to today’s institutions of higher education. In multicultural education, including voices of Muslim women increases our understanding of their ethnic and religious cultures. It is a knowledge base in its accumulating infancy but growing in its importance more than ever.

Understanding Islamic and Muslim customs and traditions, the hijab and Islamic dress, levels of integration, and how campus climates play a role in student development is essential for developing a society that welcomes and appreciates diversity. Institutions of higher education need to understand this group as education aims at democratic inclusion of all students. I hope to clarify some of the misunderstandings and ignorance that has developed regarding Muslims and Islamic culture and present possible solutions to inform
higher education practice. The findings should be useful to researchers, educators, student affairs professionals, the Muslim community, and the general public. More importantly, helping participants come to new, deeper meaning in their lives will be important for liberating them from negative social hegemonies.

Definition of Terms

There are a number of terms associated with the Islamic religion and Muslim culture. The following include, but are not limited to, terms, individuals, and groups mentioned in the text that relate to Muslim students.

1. Islam – the religious doctrine built upon the concept of submission to one God, Allah, and to the prophet Muhammad.

2. Muhammad – founder of Islam and regarded as the last Prophet of God within that faith.

3. Muslim – a believer in Islam.

4. Qur’an – the sacred text and foundation of Islamic law, religion, culture and politics.

5. Caliph – a spiritual leader claiming succession from Muhammad.

6. Sunni – a division of Islam that accepts the first four caliphs as rightful successors of Muhammad.

7. Shiite – a division of Islam that regards Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, as the legitimate successor of the Prophet and disregards the three caliphs who succeeded him.

8. Hijab – the headscarf worn by Muslim women to maintain standards of modesty.
9. Hijabbi – common term for a Muslim woman who wears the hijab/headscarf.

10. Haliqa – a safe place where Muslim women meet, openly discuss personal, global and religious issues and learn with other Muslim women.

11. Muslim Student Association (MSA) – a campus student organization to bring together Muslims of diverse backgrounds and cultures to facilitate networking, educating and empowering of the students under one unified, organized, proactive community.

12. Desi – refers to the people and culture or ethnic background of South Asian heritage with ancestry from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Maldives and Sri Lanka.


**Overview of the Chapter**

Many college campuses include female Muslim students. Considering the lack of research specifically examining this student population, this phenomenological study explored the ways that late adolescent Muslim women develop, understand, assert, and maintain their personal and social identities. Establishing a clear and stable sense of identity is a major task for college students (Chickering 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). How we see ourselves, how we connect with others, and how others view us are important aspects of identity negotiation. Applying perspectives and ideas derived from the conceptual frameworks of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) and multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), this research investigates identity negotiation, interpersonal interactions, and sense of belonging.
within a changing psychological, social, and historical context. Using multiple methods of qualitative data collection, the goal of this study was to discover the relationship between social interactions and to improve our knowledge regarding ethnic, gender, and religious identity development. Moreover, by participants sharing their lived experiences, they had the opportunity to rethink their own personal meanings and find new perspectives in their lives.

**Overview of this Dissertation**

In this study, I examined the experiences of a group of late adolescent Muslim women obtaining an undergraduate college education in the Southeastern United States. To best understand their lived experiences, it was ideal to explore their backgrounds, current experiences, how they view themselves, and other contextual elements that have the potential to influence their identity. These participants shared their stories and I sought to make sense of how they constructed the multiple aspects of their identities, as well as the influence of social interactions in and out of the classroom during their college matriculation.

In the chapters that follow, I summarize and analyze the experiences of a sample of seven late adolescent Muslim women. In Chapter Two, I discuss the current literature within and outside the field of education regarding identity development, Muslim culture, and Muslim educational experiences. The chapter also presents the conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism and multiple dimensions of identity for this dissertation. Chapter Three presents the research methodological map I used to conduct this research. I describe my research design of phenomenology; the site; how I gained access, selected participants, gathered and analyzed data; my efforts to increase trustworthiness; the role I played as
researcher; and the challenges and limitations that emerged. Using the participants’ own words, Chapter Four presents the composite of the meaning and essence of identity development. Finally, in Chapter Five, I conclude with a discussion of the major findings and their link to the related research question and literature. Implications and future research options to help institutions of higher education respond to the developmental needs of Muslim women are also discussed.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As the nation’s demographics rapidly change, American colleges and universities are becoming more diverse. The American Muslim population now numbers in the millions. Some are first generation immigrants to the U.S. who consider America a land of opportunity and freedom. Others are born in the U.S. as second or third generation of immigrants. Furthermore, Islam includes more than a billion people in the world and is the fastest growing faith in this country (Afridi, 2001; Haddad, et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). Coming from different nationalities, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, Muslims speak many languages and practice an assortment of customs and traditions. Seeing their marginalized reality in the United States as deliberate, many Muslims experience and perceive anti-Muslim prejudice (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Sirin & Fine, 2008). The September 11, 2001 catastrophe, further brought fear and distrust of the Muslim population from many Americans. As never before, Muslims and the Islamic faith became a matter of public discourse. Popular media flamed the fires by constantly airing radical and extremist actions of some Middle-Eastern Muslims. For many Muslims the horrific events at the World Trade Center marked a turning point in how Americans accept them within their neighborhoods, communities, and society at large.

In order to understand how late adolescent Muslim women interpret their college experiences and make sense of self, it is essential to recognize how ethnicity, gender, and religion play a role in everyday life. Therefore, in this section, I investigate the literature within and outside the field of education. By examining the college experiences of late
adolescent Muslim women, this dissertation aims to further our understanding of social 
interactions and explore the complex process of identity development.

I begin by providing an overview of the Muslim culture and what it means to be an 
emerging adult Muslim woman in America. In reviewing the current knowledge base on the 
experiences of Muslims on college campuses, I consider acculturation and socialization, as 
well as the negotiation of identity. Next, I present brief summaries of foundational student 
development theories of psychosocial student development, specifically ethnicity, gender and 
faith/spirituality. Finally, I explain the conceptual framework and how these concepts inform 
my interpretation of the findings. I begin by explaining symbolic interactionism followed by 
a discussion of the multiple dimensions of identity model, with an emphasis on ethnicity, 
gender and religious identity development, understanding, assertion, and maintenance.

**Muslim Culture**

The ethnic, racial, and religious landscape of the United States has changed markedly 
over the years. Muslims constitute an important part of this increasingly diverse 
environment. As the U.S. Muslim population continues to grow (Afridi, 2001; Suarez-
Orozco, 2008), it becomes all the more important to understand the realities of this vastly 
diverse population. There are multiple countries of origin, languages, classes, religious 
practices, and political views within the Muslim population (Afridi, 2001; Bilge & Aswad, 
1996; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, 2004; Haddad, et al., 
2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). Further diversifying this population are the 
two major denominations within the Islamic faith – Sunnis and Shiites. Sunnis make up the
majority of the Muslim population, while Shiites represent approximately 15 percent (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Even though Sunnis and Shiites share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs, they differ in their political views (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). The division between Shiites and Sunnis dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The major focus for Shiites is a hereditary privileged class of spiritual leaders. Shiites also believe in martyrdom and only the heirs of the Prophet are legitimate successors. On the other hand, Sunnis believe leadership of the community is not a birthright. Rather, while Sunnis recognize and respect Ali, they believe trust is the basis of leadership and Muhammad’s successors rightfully took his place as the leaders of Muslims. For Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite, religion is an important part of their daily lives. “Islam means ‘a strong commitment to God’ and shares the same Arabic root as the word for peace, or salaam” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. 7). Muslims, like Christians and Jews, worship the God of Abraham and recognize Biblical prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Afridi, 2001; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Many Muslims regard religion as their primary identity. Their Islamic faith provides a source of meaning, guidance, consolation, and community (Afridi, 2001; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Having an enriched religious/spiritual life is essential for many Muslims (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). “According to the Qur’an, diversity in belief, cultures, and traditions is part of God’s intended creation and a sign of his wisdom” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. 9). The Qur’an emphasizes the unity of all believers around a shared faith, regardless of ethnicity or race. Believing in one God (Allah) and his messenger Muhammad
affirms the foundation of Islam (Afridi, 2001; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Muslims believe only God should be worshiped. This ideology permeates every aspect of Muslim life from prayer five times daily, the fast of Ramadan and Almsgiving to the respectful treatment of others, as well as the manner of social exchanges (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

There are many diverse interpretations of Islam and the Qur’an leading to a wide variety of Muslim representations and realities, such as women’s rights and freedoms. These different interpretations of Islam cause Muslim females to struggle with their understanding of their role as Muslim women in America. “As women differ in terms of place or origin, racial-ethnic background, education, performance of Islamic practices, they also differ in the degree to which they choose to identify with mainstream American life and culture” (Haddad, et al., 2006, p. 13).

Similarly, patriarchal social arrangements and religious ideology influence the lives of Muslim women (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). Largely influenced by deep-rooted assumptions and stereotypes, popular public opinion generally ignores the diversity within the Muslim population (Afridi, 2001; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, et al., 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). For centuries, Muslim women have been the subject of intrigue as well as pity (El-Solh & Mabro, 1991; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). While women have specific roles within Muslim culture, their rights and freedoms differ among the various countries of origin. Living within culturally and religiously defined boundaries is a major expectation for many Muslim women. Some of these expectations include obeying their families; being good daughters, wives and mothers;
and protecting their family honor (Barazangi, 1996; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad & Smith, 1996).

While the United States has a long history of integrating various immigrant groups, American history is also full of ethnic and cultural tensions (Sirin & Fine, 2008). According to Esposito and Mogahed (2007), the media frequently portrays Muslim women as victims of a repressive social order. Increasingly, popular perceptions about Muslims continue to echo these stereotypical images damaging Islam’s reputation. “Although Islam, similar to Christianity and Judaism, was predicated on a hierarchical social structure, it also preached an ethical message regarding the equality of human beings” (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994, p. 18). Contrary to popular belief that Muslim women are submissive and subservient to men, the Qur’an encourages all Muslims to pursue educational opportunities (Haddad, et al, 2006).

While there is great variety in the interpretation of Islamic values and histories, many Muslims share common family values and beliefs, including roles for men and women, regardless of country of origin. The ethnic and cultural diversity within Muslim communities also dramatically affects opinions regarding the education of Muslim females. However, Muslim women have seldom had the opportunity to speak for themselves, about themselves (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). As increasing numbers of Muslim women become more aware of the importance of education (Haddad, et al., 2006), they are enrolling in college and obtaining advanced degrees. Becoming more visible in the global society, their voices are beginning to be heard.
As noted, for many Muslims, religion is a key component of their cultural identity (Barazangi, 2004; Haddad, et al., 2006; Zine, 2006). For Muslim women living in the United States, American customs and beliefs may influence attitudes about gender role identity (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999). This exposure and influence may represent conflicting ideas about women and their roles. Therefore, for female Muslim American youth, they face the daily struggle of maintaining the standards of Islam while considering the values of American society (Ajrouch, 1999, 2004; Haddad & Smith, 1996; Sirin & Fine, 2008).

**Family Expectations and Influence**

According to Kulwicki (2000), many Islamic societies view the family unit as the foundation of society, providing security and a stable and strong social, economic, and emotional support network. All family members are obligated to respect and conform to the norms of both the family and society. Popular opinion often sees Muslim identity as rather dogmatic in its belief structure. In truth, Muslim identity is about protecting cultural norms, customs, and values considered traditionally important (Barazangi, 2004). Muslim families often find it difficult to negotiate between the strength of American culture and their inherited cultural values (Haddad, et al., 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Additionally, Muslim women are required to contribute emotionally and financially to the needs of her family, sometimes sacrificing her own needs (Haddad, et al., 2006). Family comes first, so much so that it sometimes impedes the educational development for Muslim females.

Still, Islamic cultures highly value education. Based on the very first word of the Qur’an, Muslim leaders emphasized the belief that education for all Muslims was a teaching
of the prophet Muhammad (Barazangi, 2004). Females are encouraged by the Islamic ideology to seek and obtain educational opportunities just as much as males (Haddad, et al., 2006). The reality is family and tradition sometimes takes precedent over educational opportunities. Yet, in recent years, Muslim women in the United States have become more cognizant of the importance of education (Haddad, et al., 2006). The relationships between traditional Muslim family values, the encouragement of the Qur’an, and progressive American societal culture will influence how Muslim female students interpret their future curricular and co-curricular experiences.

Recently, research on immigrant students’ identities and their experiences in American schools has increased. Several studies have focused on the experiences of adult Muslims in America, yet, there is limited research on Muslim adolescent and emerging adult experiences, especially collegiate experiences (Leonard, 2003; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). In Muslim culture, women are “the bearers of culture, the center of the family unit that provides a force for moral and social order and the means of stability for the next generation” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. 22). Research indicates that while Muslim women admire some aspects of the West, they see a rapid decline in the moral principles in American society (Haddad & Smith, 1996) and do not endorse many American values (Al-Ma’seb 2006; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007). Therefore, many Muslim parents fear U.S. educational institutions will encourage their daughters to assimilate to American culture (Barazangi, 1996; Bilge & Aswad, 1996; Eisenlohr, 1996; Gunel, 2007). Negotiating between their parents’ Muslim culture and American culture may cause confusion among
female Muslim youth growing up in America. As they try to conceptualize and practice their parents Islamic values within American society, they may struggle with both identities (Barazangi, 1996; Eisonlohr, 1996).

As with all societies, there are complex realities of gender and family relations among Muslims. Muslim youth struggle to affirm their religious and cultural values at the same time they are trying to function in American society (Haddad & Smith, 1996). Because of cultural values and gender roles, many Muslim parents expect their daughters to contribute to the household, in preparation for becoming wives and mothers (Sirin & Fine, 2008). In some instances, these family expectations can have negative results on the college campus, such as limiting opportunities to participate in campus-sponsored events due to cultural obligations.

**Islamic Dress and Wearing of the Hijab**

In addition to family expectations, Muslim girls also negotiate the wearing of the hijab (head covering or Muslim style of dress for modesty and privacy). Islamic dress and the hijab represent important social, cultural, and political meanings for Muslims (Zine, 2006). Cultural interpretations of Islam create the basis for the shape and extent of the covering. Just as there is great variety within the Muslim culture, there is diversity in the style, usage, and practice of wearing the hijab (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003) and not all Muslim women feel the need to wear it. Moreover, the very practice of wearing the hijab can make individuals more visible, especially in American society where the practice of covering is not common. Therefore, it is important to understand the various ways Muslims view and make meaning of the hijab.
According to Bartkowski and Read (2003), many factors influence the decision to wear or not to wear the hijab. For some Muslim women, they believe the hijab is part of their identity and is an expression of their religious identities and worldviews (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). Traditional Muslims consider the hijab a symbol of women’s obedience to Islamic principles (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). Others perceive the hijab as religious mandate and used to censor and punish Muslim women (Bartowski & Read, 2003; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). With multiple meanings associated with the hijab, it is crucial to emphasize how Muslim women’s decision to wear the hijab can differ, depending on ethnic or cultural norms.

While stereotypes and bigotry are present throughout American society and directed towards individuals of all cultures, Muslim women who wear the hijab often face increased discrimination because many Americans associate the hijab with oppression and terrorism (Haddad, et al, 2006; Zine, 2006) and as evidence of the subordinate role of Muslim women (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). Zine (2006) labeled this disapproval of Muslim women’s decision to wear the hijab ‘gendered Islamophobia’ (p. 240). “Islamophobia was coined to describe a two-stranded form of racism – rooted in both the different physical appearance of Muslims and also in an intolerance of their religious and cultural beliefs” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p. 136). More importantly, Haddad (2004) described how Muslims in America believe anti-Muslim attitudes are deliberate and specifically leading to a marginalized reality of being disengaged from the American culture. Zine’s (2006) study also shows that because Muslim
girls experienced racism and Islamophobia in schools due to their wearing of the hijab, they felt marginalized by their peers in school.

**Interactions with the Opposite Gender**

In some Islamic cultures, women are restricted from interacting with members of the opposite gender. For these women, a major purpose of covering one’s self is to make invisible their physical appearance. “Symbolic segregation is reflected in a dress code which shields the physical attributes or the identity of its female wearer from the eyes of non-kin males with whom social intercourse is limited or prohibited” (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994, p. 8). In public places where unrelated men and women are present, Islamic dress codes function as a form of control (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). Feeling protected in social interactions, some Muslim women feel empowered wearing the hijab. Others feel isolated because often times the hijab makes individuals more visible, especially in an environment where women covering themselves is not a common practice.

In addition to covering, some Muslim cultures require girls to avoid eye contact with males, speaking loudly, and touching males (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, et al., 2006). These cultural beliefs can cause problems for female Muslim students in their educational experiences. For example, some Muslim parents socialize their daughters to avoid interactions with male teachers and boys in the classroom. Gunel (2007), found that lack of trust, conflict, and cultural differences contributed to Muslim girls’ discomfort inside and outside the classroom. Understanding these potential conflicts can help academia provide culturally responsive classroom and campus environments.
Muslim Culture Conclusions

Sadly, there remains little U.S. societal understanding of Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab (headscarf), prayer and religious obligations, diets and traditions, the role of family and community responsibilities, and educational needs. Largely influenced by assumptions and stereotypes, public opinion generally ignores the diversity of the Muslim culture (Afridi, 2001; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, 2004; Haddad, et al., 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). Popular news media often misrepresent Muslims. Depicting the radical actions of few and negative images of marginalized Muslim women, the media further perpetuates bias toward this population (Afridi, 2001; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). In today’s cultural crossroads, it is imperative to understand how Muslims live, think and confront challenges to their innate customs while trying to assume an American identity. Without these understandings, the U.S. population may continue to marginalize Muslims and isolate them within their Muslim communities, including college campuses.

The College Experiences of Muslims in America

Looking at college student perceptions of the religious bias of their professors, Speck (1997) discovered that students identified four problems:

1. professors’ misunderstanding of Muslim practices may result in misrepresenting them in the classroom; 2. professors may use media that introduce misunderstandings about Islam; 3. professors may fail to maintain attitudes of
respect for certain religions in the classroom; and (4) professors may not make an
effort to accommodate students’ religious practices. (p. 40).

His study revealed that Muslim students felt Americans do not understand Islamic practices
and find it difficult to correct misperceptions. Often times, Americans perceive Muslim
women who adhere to Islamic dress as passive, oppressed and not fluent in English. Class
schedules often conflict with the religious obligations of five daily prayers. Social functions
often include alcohol and other prohibited foods for Muslims. Especially difficult is
correcting professors because Muslims view professors as authorities and feel they should
not question their views. Because cultural differences and prejudice based on religious
practices negatively influence students’ educational experiences, Speck (1997) suggests
several possible solutions: recognizing preconceptions, becoming culturally alert, looking at
the commonalities amongst religions and cultures, seeking avenues to learn about Islam, not
relying on media and textbooks for accurate interpretations of Islam and allowing Muslim
students to present a variety of perspectives.

Like so many other minority groups, Muslim women attempt to find balance between
their native culture and that of American society. Acculturation refers to the process of
changing cultural attitudes, values and behaviors due to firsthand experience with two
acculturation levels: (1) Assimilation is the rejection of one’s native cultural identity and
acceptance of society’s values and beliefs; (2) Integration is the acceptance of the dominant
culture while maintaining one’s native cultural identity; (3) Separation refers to rejecting
mainstream culture; and (4) Marginalization or deculturation is the rejection of both the native and dominant cultural identities. He also noted that individuals face two challenges during the acculturation process: cultural maintenance of one’s own native cultural identity and deciding whether the cross-cultural contacts with mainstream society are positive and valuable. According to Sirin and Fine (2008), “Integration does not require the erasure of culture, but rather an engagement with a pluralistic society” (p. 2). Therefore, for acculturation to occur for Muslim female students, cultural and religious blending and equality must exist on college campuses.

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, McMurtrie (2001) reveals many of the conflicts Muslim college student face with society, faith, and one another. She addresses issues regarding interactions with members of the opposite sex, decisions to wear the hijab, arranged marriages, and struggles to find acceptance. Within this article, students shared their views about the complications of trying to fit in and the possibility of compromising one’s beliefs. Female Muslim students face pressures from their families to limit dealings with the opposite gender and to consent with arranged marriages. Trying to find their own individuality is also difficult. They often find themselves marginalized in both mainstream American society as well as the Muslim community, especially if their beliefs and/or practices differ from other Muslims. Moreover, some parents encourage wearing the hijab while others fear their daughters will face discrimination if they do. Female Muslim students who do veil shared that they consider the practice as an outward symbol of their faith and often find they need to challenge the ideas of others that Islam is hostile towards women.
Collecting data prior to September 11, 2001, Darnell Cole and Shafiqa Ahmadi (2003) explored the self-perceptions of Muslim women who veil because there was limited research on Muslim women’s development and the role religion plays in students’ responses to college. Through open-ended interviews with eight Muslim women who veil, they found six salient themes emerged regarding their decisions to veil or not to veil: “Being a good Muslim, a Muslim identity, stereotypes and misconceptions, social reinforcement, modesty without the veil, and religious obligation” (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, p. 54). The women revealed that personal meanings attached to the veil, such as religious and social interpretations, family expectations and cultural norms, influenced their decisions to wear it. They also indicated peer interactions had the most influence on feelings of alienation or acceptance. Sadly, unpleasant interactions lead to the reexamination of veiling. Most importantly, the participants shared “veiling in the college environment created barriers in their academic and social spheres which affected their sense of belonging in the educational community” (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, p. 65).

Recognizing the Muslim community came under increased scrutiny after the events of September 11, 2001; Peek (2003) began to explore institutions of higher education responses and reactions to Muslim students in the New York City area. This initial attempt to understand the Muslim experience in America revealed universities were quick to respond, supplying various sources of support for the Muslim population. While students were generally pleased with the reactions of their colleges, they wished their institutions provided more information and educational events about Islam to help reduce misperceptions. For
example, some students felt safe on their campuses and received extra special treatment from others within their campus community. Other Muslim students experienced social trepidation, as well as verbal and physical assault and even refrained from traveling alone. Muslim parents also became frightened for their children encouraging them to change their appearance. They asked their sons to trim or shave their beards and their daughters to stop wearing the hijab. Muslim students experienced a wide range of emotions in response to the horrific terrorist acts and the negative and inaccurate media representations. As a method to cope with feelings of sadness, fear, anger and blame, students began to turn to their religion and fellow Muslim students. Drawing upon their beliefs, they set out to educate their college communities through student organizations, information fairs, and classroom discussions.

Using her initial findings, Peek (2005a) used an inductive research model to gain an understanding of the religious, ethnic, and gender identity development in response to crisis for Muslim students. Exploring the social psychological effects of prejudice and hostility, she examined the ways that young Muslim Americans establish and maintain their personal and social identities. She found that group consciousness and solidarity emerged as religious identity became more central to the students sense of self. Peek (2005a) asserts, “Religious, ethnic, and gender identities were shaped and further strengthened by the post-September 11 hostility as well as the perceived threat to both Islam and their individual identities” (p. 199). Her research shows the establishment of a religious identity is a dynamic, social process that is continuously evolving in response to internal conflicts and choices and external pressures and rewards. Therefore, to develop a strong religious identity, students must acknowledge
others, make individual choices and increase self-awareness and reflection (Peek, 2005a). As for ethnic identity development, Peek (2005a) found it evolves based upon historical and social events and circumstances. When the participants discussed their views on gender, they expressed that “rather than passively accepting [stereotypes, they] tried to change those beliefs through their appearance, words, and actions” (p. 189). However, while students move through their ethnic identity development and women felt the need to confront misperceptions, the study found that the construction of a religious identity was of much more importance to the students.

Further exploring the development of a religious identity in Muslim students, Peek (2005) developed a model of Muslim religious identity development. Her model contains three phases: religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity. Individuals in the first stage, religion as ascribed identity, either take religion for granted or deny religion altogether. In the second stage, religion as chosen identity, individuals make the conscious decision to embrace their Muslim identity. Finally, in the third stage, religion as declared identity, individuals felt it was “vitally important to both strengthen and assert their identities…in order to retain positive self-perception and correct public misperception” (Peek, 2005, p. 236). Through this research, she found “as the participants moved through each of the stages, their faith became more intense and their religious practice increased, as did their identification with the religion of Islam and the individual characteristic of being Muslim” (Peek, 2005, p. 223). Even though she recognizes her model is not universal, Peek (2005) believes when individuals strongly affirm their
religious identity there is greater probability that they will experience enhanced group solidarity and cohesion.

**Psychosocial Student Development**

Psychosocial theories of development help make sense of how individuals feel, behave, and interpret the meaning of experience. An individual’s background, past experiences, and personal belief system influence their experiences and personal growth. The development of one’s sense of self, or identity, is a dynamic concept that changes with both positive and negative life events. The world of the college campus represents both a macro and microcosm of just such life events. Environmental factors such as institutional challenges and supports (Sanford, 1966, 1967), students’ levels of curricular and co-curricular involvement (Astin, 1984), feelings of not fitting in or marginality and feelings of importance and value or mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) and the need for validation (Rendon, 1994) also influence personal development. These theories reflect how students negotiate their college experiences and how institutions of higher education can better support them. As college enrollments continue to increase fueled by significant enrollments of minority and female students (AASCU, 2006), researchers are constantly evolving student development theories to address cultural variations. However, much of the psychosocial identity development research focuses on a single dimension of identity such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, faith, or gender.
Identity Development

Identity is a central focus of psychosocial student development theorizing and research in higher education. Establishing a clear and definite sense of who you are and how you fit into the world is a major developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) defined identity as “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly” (p. 42). Focusing on the affects of socialization on sense of self, Erikson organized life into eight stages of development from birth to death. Each stage is marked by a conflict with two possible outcomes. Individuals must successfully understand, accept and balance both ends of the spectrum in order to achieve favorable outcomes (Erikson, 1968). During stage 5, identity vs. role confusion, adolescents become aware of their individuality, questioning and forming their sense of self based upon personal and social explorations about themselves and their place in the world (Erikson, 1968).

Largely situated in stage five of Eriksonian theory, Chickering and Reisser (1993) defined identity as a “growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem” (p. 173). Identity is fluid, constantly evolving as individuals deal with experiences of otherness and conflicts that challenge their concept of self. Chickering (1969) argued that development is a multifaceted and complex process that requires both challenges and supports from the college environment. Upon resolving crises, identity becomes a compound, meaningful stability over time and place (Josselson, 2005).
Ethnicity.

As families immigrate to America, individuals undergo transformation in the social, mental and emotional aspects of their personality (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Even though they are constantly interacting with society, many cultural qualities inherent in ethnicity are not widely accepted in America (Zhou, 1997). For this reason, many immigrants enter America facing stereotypes, racism and lower status in society. In spite of these obstacles, ethnic identity formation involves developing an understanding and acceptance of one’s own group, positive attitudes and feelings towards one’s ethnic group (Phinney, 1996; Skowron, 2004), interest and knowledge about the group, and involvement in group traditions (Phinney, 1996). While ethnic identity is critical to one’s overall individual and collective identity, psychosocial theories often fail to consider ethnic differences in identity formation.

According to Phinney’s (1990) model of ethnic identity development, individuals go through three stages of exploring their culture. In the first stage, diffusion-foreclosure, individuals have not explored their ethnic identity. On one side of the spectrum, diffusion shows ethnicity is of little importance. To the other extreme, those in foreclosure acquire their ethnic attitudes in childhood. Not only is there failure to explore ethnicity, but individuals within this stage show a general lack of interest in exploring their culture. During the second stage, moratorium, individuals gradually seek additional knowledge about their ethnic background. Thus, becoming more emotionally invested in their own idea of what ethnicity means to them. In the final stage, identity achievement, individuals resolve issues
with their own ethnicity and secure a sense of group membership while also accepting the cultures of others.

While ethnic identity changes over time as individuals have different experiences, it is central to their psychological functioning. It is important for minority students to examine and explore preexisting attitudes and assumptions about their ethnicity as a necessary step toward identity achievement (Phinney, 1996). While individuals progress through stages, they may reexamine aspects of their ethnic identity and return to earlier stages throughout their lifespan (Phinney, 1996; Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Rather than holding true to a specific, unchanging ethnic identity, it is more important to maintain a positive ethnic identity. Skowron (2004) indicates that individuals with a positive ethnic identity usually display higher levels of self-esteem and lower stress levels. Serving as an asset, an individual’s identity and self-esteem can have a major impact on their own experiences, as well as the broader group’s collective identity. Since immigrants experience a great deal of stress in their transition to American society, perhaps the most important aspect of ethnic identity is a sense of belonging.

**Gender.**

One of the most basic common denominators in identity development is the role gender plays in social life. In studying identity development in late adolescence, Marcia (1966) found that not all students experience similar approaches to gaining a sense of self. He found that individuals question the values and goals defined by parents through exploration and make a commitment based on their own values and goals (Evans, et al.,
Building off Marcia’s work, Josselson (1987) examined identity development in women. She found social, sexual and religious values were more salient for women. Additionally, crisis and conflict within relationships presented growth and change for women (Josselson, 1987).

According to Josselson’s (1987) model, women experience four pathways to identity development: Drifters (diffusion), Guardians (foreclosure), Searchers (moratorium), and Pathmakers (identity achievement). Drifters are women who do not experience crisis or make commitments. They generally make decisions in the moment with little concern for consistency. Guardians make commitments without crisis or exploration. They typically adopt the values and beliefs of their parents without question. Searchers actively question parental values in an effort to figure out their own identity for themselves. While they have not yet made a commitment, they experience a lot of overwhelming crisis during their exploration. Finally, women who achieve their identity have successfully explored and committed to a self-actualized identity. Taking risks and trying new things enable Pathmakers to development strong, self-directed, and highly adaptive identities.

Identity also expresses both our separateness from others and our ways of connecting to others (Josselson, 2005). For women, identity development focuses on the need to assert the self while maintaining connection to others. Failing to achieve one’s identity is synonymous with failing to separate or maintain a healthy balance between individuality and being part of the group. While women may begin at different starting points, they all focus on the kind of person they want to become. In opposition to male development, interpersonal
relationships play a major role in women’s identity development (Josselson, 1987). Rooted in self-awareness, women possess a greater capacity for intimacy and establish their identity by relating to others. Always evolving, women negotiate identity by considering the world they live in, the relationships they have, and how they gain a sense of pride in themselves without needing the approval of others.

**Faith/Spirituality.**

Student development researchers often neglect the search for purpose and meaning in life. As the basis for the formation of beliefs, values and meanings, faith is a common feature in human beings (Fowler, 1981). The first to examine the development of spirituality, Fowler (1981) described faith as the process of making meaning out of life’s experiences and understanding such meanings in social relations, personal identity and cultural significance. Grounding his work in cognitive and moral approaches, he focused on how beliefs and values gain importance for individuals.

Developing a six stage theory of faith development that covers the lifespan, Fowler (1981) suggested as individuals experience crisis, they move from one stage to the next. During the first stage, children imitate authority figures and believe what they are told. As children transition to stage two, faith is defined by their larger religious community. Within this community, individuals encounter various perspectives, resolve conflicts, and answer faith-based questions enabling the development of a more personal relationship with their own faith. During stage three, adolescent experiences extend beyond the family, which may cause increased contradictions between the values of authority sources and their own
personal beliefs. Identifying with the larger community, early adolescents accept the
standard doctrines and teachings of their faith. In late adolescence, the movement from stage
three to stage four is particularly critical. Individuals must begin to take seriously the
responsibility for his or her own beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles. During this significant
developmental period, adolescents reflect upon and evaluate their identity and worldview.
During stage five, adults differentiate between their internalized personal beliefs while
recognizing the validity of others’ beliefs. As individuals approach mid-life, they critically
reflect on their own worldview, systems of virtue and the cultivation of others’ identities and
meanings. Finally, stage six is marked by the individual’s spirit of inclusivity. Conflicts
confronted in previous stages become less important as one finds complete security within
their faith and total altruism. This stage is rarely achieved.

While Fowler (1981) illustrates that constructing an identity in faith becomes more
self-reliant as individuals transition from stage three to stage four, he did not specifically
address faith development in traditional-age college students. Extending the works of
Fowler, Parks (2000) focused on adolescents and emerging adults to examine further what
happens between stages three and four. In her view, there is an overlap of religion and
spirituality as individuals experience a more personal search for meaning, transcendence,
completeness, purpose and “apprehension of spirit as the animating essence at the core of
life” (p. 16). Parks (2000) identified self, other, world, and God as interactive components of
faith. She suggests that experiences are shaped by forms of knowing (cognitive processes),
forms of dependence (affective aspects of relationships), and forms of community (social and
cultural context) (Evans, 2003; Love, 2001; Love & Talbot, 2005). During college, students have a more dualistic view of the world. Comparing themselves to others and the need to establish a sense of belonging to a larger community usually shapes their sense of self. Presented with new ideas, students experience conflicts as they begin to develop a sense of individuality. They begin to “trust the truth that emerges in the dialectic, or, better, in the communion between self and other, self and world, self and ‘God’” (Parks, 2005, p.147).

Spirituality in higher education is currently one of the fastest growing areas of interest and research. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) illustrate that college plays a large role in spiritual development, directly influencing values and beliefs. The work of Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) help us understand how ways of knowing, ways of depending, and experiencing community are going through major transitions during the college experience. Furthermore, Parks (2000) reminds us our surroundings, environment and social context play a central role in the formation of identity and faith. Since holistic student development is an important component of higher education, institutions must provide free and safe places to explore meaning, purpose and truth. Through the exploration of religion and engaging in spiritual dialogues, students become more comfortable with ambiguity and doubt as they work toward advancing their psychosocial identity development (Parks, 2000).

**Social identities.**

Throughout the lifespan, individuals struggle with multiple facets of their social identities simultaneously. Social identity development models focus on an individual’s identity as a result of intergroup relations and perceived in-group and out-group membership.
(Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). Individuals classify themselves within various groups based on different social contexts, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, social class, and/or faith/spirituality. Different social contexts help individuals define their environment and affect how they think, feel or act (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Holland, et al., 1998; Mead, 1934; Vryan, et al., 2003).

In discussing multiple social oppressions, Reynolds and Pope (1991) drew attention to the importance of multiple identities. Through their studies of individuals with complex realities of oppression they discovered four ways to resolve identity: passively identifying with only one aspect of self, consciously identifying with only one aspect of self, segmental identification with multiple aspects of self, and integrative identification with multiple aspects of self. Their research brought to light the risks and challenges of only considering one aspect of an individual’s identity development.

In 1996, McEwen proposed a theoretical model to address the issue of multiple dimensions of identity (as cited in Jones & McEwen, 2000). McEwen’s model showed the many intersections among the various aspects of identity over the span of a lifetime. However, the model had not been empirically tested therefore, Jones and McEwen (2000) developed the first student development model, Multiple Dimensions of Identity, representing the intersection of personal and social identities.

**Psychosocial Student Development Conclusions**

Although psychosocial development theories have greatly advanced our understanding of identity development, most research fails to include minority students in
samples, which may skew developmental patterns for these students. In particular, current research in the field of student psychosocial development provides a limited understanding of the multiple dimensions of identity development for members of both dominant and subordinate groups. The assumption is late adolescent Muslim women work to discover and develop self through social interactions and interpretations of these exchanges along with appropriate institutional supports and challenges during their college careers.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework plays a central role in the research process. According to Mertens (2005), the conceptual framework should guide the study and give it boundaries by framing the problem, the purpose, and the collection and analysis of data. Researchers who employ phenomenological research wish to understand the meaning of events and interactions of individuals in specific situations. Therefore, I used symbolic interactionism and the multiple dimensions of identity model to frame my understanding of the research question: What is the nature of identity development during college for late adolescent Muslim female students?

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism is a major sociological perspective that views people’s selves as social products that are also intentional and creative. Herbert Blumer (1969), created three core principles of symbolic interactionism: (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to them; (2) the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with others and the society; and (3) these
meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. These core principles explain the creation of one’s identity and socialization into a larger community.

The first core principle is meaning. This refers to the idea that individuals act toward people and objects based upon previously assigned meanings. Blumer (1969) believed this was central to human behavior. The second core principle is language. Language gives individuals a means to negotiate meaning through symbols. Influenced by Mead (1934), Blumer (1969) believed individuals are products of society. Humans come to identify meaning through social exchanges and experiences. Finally, thought is the third core principle. Thought involves the interpretation of symbols and the acceptance that different points of view can exist.

The main goals of symbolic interactionism are to describe and understand the dynamic nature of reality and human life. According to Mead (1934), individuals must mutually share understandings of their interactions in order for them to be meaningful in society. Social structures including cultural, gender, and religious frameworks affect the ways in which human experiences are lived (Denzin, 1992). Focusing on the details of interaction among individuals and groups, symbolic interactionists study how individuals use and interpret symbols to communicate with one another (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). Thus, individuals create meaning through social interactions and experiences of co-existence with others. People establish their attitudes, expectations and behaviors by what they understand in cultural and contextual interpretations (Denzin, 1992).
Social identities are the result of identification of self with socially constructed groups of people or social structures (Holland, et al., 1998; Vryan, et al., 2003). Personal identities include aspects of personality that define individuals as unique (Vryan, et al., 2003). Therefore, individuals use symbols to create and maintain impressions of themselves as they construct reality in social situations (Goffman, 1959). According to Blumer (1969), since individuals can represent experiences symbolically, they can engage in self-reflection and evaluation, essentially becoming agents of their own development. Therefore, their reality is a social product determined by personal interpretation and action.

Symbolic interactionism influenced the works of Husserl and Heidegger in phenomenology (Herman-Kinney & Verschaeve, 2003). The phenomenology mission is to uncover what is hidden in everyday life (van Manen, 1990) just as symbolic interactionist researchers investigate how people create meaning during social interaction, how they present and construct their identity, and how they define situations of co-existence with others (Blumer, 1969). Because multiple and varied dealings are inherent during the college experience, to what extent does this influence the identity negotiation of Muslim females? One of the perspective's central ideas is that individuals act as they do because of how they define situations and make meaning of their experiences (Blumer, 1969). Interviews are common tools to capture participants’ actions and words (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). Investigating social phenomenon, symbolic interactionism methods are “as diverse as the society they attempt to study” (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003, p. 242). Therefore, a
qualitative approach may be especially relevant for exploring social interactions and the establishment of self.

**The Multiple Dimensions of Identity Model**

Integrating various aspects of the self to arrive at a sense of identity across time and context is critical during college (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Looking at multiple social identities, including both oppressed and dominant identities, Jones and McEwen (2000) found establishing social identities is a fluid and dynamic process occurring in different contexts. In developing a sense of self, their research found an individual’s core contains personal attributes and characteristics surrounded by multiple intersecting social identities. The model they developed “is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 408). The intersecting circles in the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model (see Appendix E) illustrate that single aspects of identity cannot be understood without considering other dimensions of self and influential contextual factors. Furthermore, Jones and McEwen (2000) discovered individuals have the potential to actively negotiate more than one aspect of their identity at a time, contextual influences determine the importance of dimensions of identity, and individuals understand and experience identity differently at different moments in their lives.

The multiple dimensions of identity model (Jones & McEwen, 2000) was the first student development conceptual framework for understanding the complexities of personal and socially constructed identities. As the complexities of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and
cognitive development research emerged, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) sought to reconceptualize the model to incorporate these intersecting developmental domains. By incorporating meaning-making, they believe the model “more thoroughly depict[s] the relationship between context and salience (and self perceptions) of identity dimensions, as well as the relationship between social identities and the core identity” (Abes, et al., 2007, p. 6). In other words, the amount of influence any contextual factor has on the different aspects of identity depends on the individual’s capacity for meaning-making. Thus, the incorporation of meaning-making into the model allows for a richer understanding of how individuals negotiate the complexities of their personal (core values, beliefs, attributes, characteristics) and their social (race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, etc.) identities. “Incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model provides a richer portrayal of not only what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do” (Abes, et al., 2007, p. 13).

Therefore, the updated model of multiple dimensions of identity “provides a holistic representation of the integration of intrapersonal development with the cognitive and interpersonal domains” (Abes, et al., 2007, p. 13).

**Conceptual Framework Conclusions**

Incorporating the multiple dimensions of identity model with symbolic interactionism, the conceptual framework shows that a relationship exists between psychological, social and historical context and highlights the importance of female Muslim undergraduates’ vulnerability to social labels and misperceptions. Stereotypes and prejudices
related to their ethnicity, gender, and/or religion are largely addressed by symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) influences the conceptual framework by highlighting how individuals create meaning during social interactions, how they construct and present their identity to others, and how they define situations of co-existence with others. Therefore, student descriptions of their college experiences may illustrate how meanings of experiences and sense of self are socially constructed through interactions with diverse others.

Social identities are a product of the environment in which we live and the people in which we associate. Recognizing that identity development is dynamic, fluid, and complex, the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) may help clarify how late adolescent Muslim women negotiate their identity across multiple contexts, specifically ethnicity, gender, and religion. With the vast diversity within the Muslim population and confronted with others perceptions of who they are, female Muslim undergraduates may actively negotiate more than one aspect of identity at a time (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). As a result, paying attention to both the social and the individual nature of identity development becomes crucial.

Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I reviewed literature that helped frame my study of identity development during college among late adolescent Muslim women. I examined how Muslim cultural background influences experiences, which has implications to understanding how Muslim women interpret their social interactions and make sense of self. I explored how
Muslim youth struggle negotiating the wearing of the hijab and to affirm their religious and cultural values while trying to function in American society. I also reviewed the limited research of how Muslim students interpret their college interactions and experiences while trying to make sense of self. Next, I addressed the issue of how the negotiation of ethnic, gender, and religious identities are complex and multifaceted. Finally, I provided information on the conceptual framework.

Along with issues of ethnicity and gender, the topic of how Muslim beliefs and practices inform gender identities as well as family dynamics is crucial to understanding the everyday experiences of late adolescent Muslim females. Since Muslim youth struggle with trying to find balance, gaining an understanding of the development, maintenance, and negotiation of the multiple aspects of their identity as well as different contextual influences is crucial for providing safe and comfortable academic and social settings for positive growth and development in and out of the classroom.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand how late adolescent Muslim women negotiate social interactions to develop, understand, assert, and maintain personal and social identities. Interested in giving a voice to Muslim undergraduate women, I sought to become familiar with their changing patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving specifically in regards to their ethnic, gender, and religious identities. I was also interested in investigating female Muslim college students’ experiences with social interactions. According to Blumer (1969), the reality of the individual is in the meanings of the experience. Through learning about the participants’ lived experiences, this study aims to provide rich descriptions of their identity negotiation within a changing psychological, social and historical context.

The research question for this study is what is the nature of identity development during college for late adolescent Muslim female students? This study aimed to assist higher education administrators with ascertaining the institutional climate and the appropriate challenges and supports that may affect Muslim female undergraduates. Thus, the primary audience for using the results of this study is higher education personnel charged with cultivating student development and measuring engagement outcomes. Finally, this section describes the methodology that guides the research, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, as well as addresses issues of trustworthiness, and the researcher’s role in the study.
Pilot Study

Prior to working on this project, I conducted a pilot study involving four female Muslim undergraduates. The pilot study focused on college climates and the participants’ sense of belonging within their campus community. Enthusiastic that I was interested in hearing about their lived experiences, the pilot study participants shared cultural tensions, fears, and personal values and beliefs that prompted more issues of interest involving their identity development. For this generation of young Muslim women, negotiation of who they are and how they fit into the world around them has occurred in the wake of 9/11. Thus, the pilot study encouraged me to research the negotiation of the multiple aspects of their identity.

Qualitative Research Design

Following the constructivist paradigm, which focuses on the perspective that knowledge is socially constructed (Mertens, 2005), every individual experiences phenomenon differently thus, multiple realities exist. The multiple realities constructed by individuals have implications for their lives and social interactions with others (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), different people experience phenomenon differently in any given context. Krathwohl (1998) states “qualitative research methods are particularly useful in understanding how individuals understand their world, in showing how individuals’ perceptions and intentions in situations determine their behavior, in exploring phenomena to find explanations, and in providing concrete and detailed illustrations of phenomena” (p. 225). Even though all participants were Muslim, their experiences are diverse because of the differences in cultural and family backgrounds, as well as previous life events. With a goal
of understanding their multiple realities, I employed a qualitative inquiry to delve into the essence of their identity development during college.

   Studying the experiences of Muslim women who share similar Islamic culture, I positioned my methodology within the constructivist paradigm with a sociological lens. Moreover, the methods I used were active listening, observing, recording, and reflecting on what participants said and did. According to Mertens (2005), the constructivist chooses a more personal, interactive mode of data collection to obtain multiple perspectives and produce interpretations of meaning. Additionally, this tendency illustrates the hermeneutics phenomenological research approach, which I executed within this research study.

   **Phenomenology**

   This study employed a phenomenological research design to understand the lived college experiences of identity development among Muslim undergraduate women in American higher education. A characteristic of phenomenology is studying the way in which members of a group interpret the world around them (Mertens, 2005). Research using phenomenology seeks to uncover the meanings in our everyday existence. True to the phenomenological tradition, meaning is in the making therefore, reflection upon previous experiences is vital (van Manen, 1990). The process includes thinking and rethinking beyond the superficial description to the meaning of experiences. Descriptive in nature, phenomenology allows participants to reflect on lived experiences and speak for themselves. Maintaining the integrity of individual perceptions, phenomenology aims to uncover the nature of experience.
According to van Manen (1990), the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences to a description of the universal essence. Rather than asking how something happens, the phenomenological researcher asks what is the nature or essence of the experience. Basically, the researcher tries to learn how people experience phenomena and to capture its meaning. By understanding the lived experiences of students, how they present their identities and interact with others within the campus environment, we can begin to understand what challenges they face and the supports they seek. Specifically, where colleges foster or inhibit their identity development. With this knowledge, institutions of higher education can design more inclusive campus communities.

In order to attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions through the participants’ point of view, I needed to set aside my own experiences, biases and preconceived ideas. Essential to the practice of phenomenology, bracketing requires researchers to take a fresh perspective toward the investigated phenomenon by suspending their own judgments (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007). Therefore, I approached data collection and data analysis organically. During data collection, I separated my past knowledge and personal experiences with identity development to allow the participants’ voices and meanings of experiences to emerge authentically. During data analysis, I connected my understanding of identity development interpretatively to the meaning, language and thoughts expressed by the participants (Blumer, 1969).

Phenomenology and qualitative methods enabled me to recognize the value of interacting with participants in the research. The meaning people make of their experience is
essential to what is experienced. Through our experiences, we construct a view of the world that determines how we act (Krathwohl, 1998). The social creation of reality allows individuals to constantly create their world in various contexts through their beliefs and actions. These interactions helped me understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences (Creswell, 2007). Using semi-structured in-depth interviews as my primary method of data collection, I was able to learn about the individual subjective experiences of Muslim female undergraduates. This study’s major focus is to understand the meaning, structure and essence of the participants’ lived experience of identity development during college from their point of view.

The Research Site

The selected university is a predominantly White, large research extensive institution located in the Southeastern United States. Nearly 60% of the student body is female. Ethnic minorities account for roughly 10% of the student population. An estimated 55% of the faculty are female and 18% are ethnic minorities. Ranked among the best U.S. public colleges and universities, the division of student affairs provides essential programs and services to enhance student development, personal growth, and academic success.

Gaining Access

The type of information a researcher obtains is crucial. Gaining access is an important element of conducting qualitative research. Glesne (1999) describes gaining access as the process a researcher goes through, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and obtaining documents to complete their study. My first step in the research
process began with applying for approval from the Human Subject Review Board (IRB) from my educational institution. Once I received permission to conduct my research, I contacted the president of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at the study site. A well-known student leader, the MSA president became my key informant or expert about the Muslim community on campus (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Well informed and accessible, she was able to point out other female Muslims who might have valuable information pertaining to this research.

Following IRB guidelines, I explained the purpose and procedures of the study and presented a shortened version of the research to the MSA president. I also described the sample population I was seeking to explore. After discussing the research in more depth with the MSA president, I inquired about how I could locate a population of Muslim females that would be interested in participating in my research. Upon receiving names and contact information for possible participants, I contacted the students, informed them about the purpose of the study and data collection methods and asked them to take part in my research. Since I relied heavily on these individuals to help recruit additional participants, I established an authentic research relationship with them. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, these contacts vouched for me as an individual and a researcher, and generally encouraged their peers to participate.

**Sample Selection**

Using the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, I used a purposeful approach to sampling. Mertens (2005) describes that within this paradigm, “efforts are made to obtain
multiple perspectives that yield better interpretations of meaning (hermeneutics) that are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange involving the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, forcing reconsideration of previous positions” (p. 15). Since my study was about late adolescent Muslim female students, I looked for individuals who identified as Muslim, were between the ages of 18 and 22, and currently enrolled in college at the undergraduate level. Purposeful sampling means the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125).

I recruited seven self-identified female Muslim students through snowball sampling. One of the most common sampling methods in qualitative inquiry, snowball sampling refers to obtaining knowledge of potential participants who match the research criteria from other participants (Creswell, 2007). According to Patton (2002), snowball sampling “is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases” (p. 237). Therefore, by contacting the university’s Muslim Student Association (MSA) and asking others for individuals to speak to, I employed snowball sampling to collect valuable recommendations to locate information rich study participants (Patton, 2002).

Each student had to meet certain criteria to participate in this study. I asked each potential participant if they identified as Muslim, were between the ages of 18 and 22, and currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. I asked all individuals exhibiting these criteria to take part in two semi-structured in-depth confidential interviews. Criterion sampling is a method to maintain quality assurance and understand cases that are likely to be
information rich (Patton, 2002). Upon final selection of participants and scheduling interviews, consent forms were distributed, signed by participants, and returned to the researcher. Upon receipt, the researcher distributed a demographic questionnaire in person during the initial interview. All fourteen interviews took place on the university campus. I concealed the names of all participants and the institution in order to protect their confidentiality. Participants were not compensated for their time and effort.

**Data Collection**

In order to gain an understanding of the identity development of female Muslim undergraduates, I collected contextual, perceptual, demographic and theoretical information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I gathered data from August 2009 through November 2009. During this time, I employed three data collection methods: individual interviews, identity maps, and document analysis. An interview is a purposeful conversation used to gather descriptive data in the participants own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Identity maps (self-pictorial representations) were included to explore their potential to reveal unique data about the processes of identity development and social inclusion. Concerned with the social construction of meaning, Banks (2001) suggests that the content of an image is the ‘internal narrative’ and “the social context that produced the image and the social relations within which the image is embedded at the moment of viewing” is the ‘external narrative’ (p. 11). The documentation provided insight into the various environmental and societal factors that have the potential to influence social interactions; however, documentation would not have made sense without the interviews (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the goal of these three
techniques was to gain a better understanding of how the participants think and the environmental and societal factors involved in their social interactions.

**Individual Interviews**

The study followed an interpretive design based on semi-structured interviews with seven participants in safe, convenient settings. I contacted each participant via email to schedule the time and location of the initial interview. I offered to conduct the one-on-one interviews in a quiet location on their university campus or at a more convenient, informal setting, such as a local coffee house. However, all participant interviews took place on the university campus. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 18 minutes, with follow-up interviews being slightly shorter in length.

I gave each participant two consent forms, one to sign and return, and the other to keep for their records. This form provided an overview of the research and informed them of their rights as a participant in my study. After receiving their signed consent forms, I gave participants a personal information form to complete. The form contained demographic questions, which enabled me to collect important historical, personal and educational background information without taking up valuable interview time.

The individual interviews followed the protocol I established (see Appendix D). I began each interview by welcoming the participant and thanking them for their time. I explained that participation is voluntary and they have the right to refrain from answering any questions that make them uncomfortable, as well as the option to end their participation at any time. I indicated the individual interviews would last approximately 45 minutes to 1
Having set forth the interview protocol for this study, the individual subjectivity of each participant has the potential to present variety in the quantity and style of questions. While the interview protocol provided a valuable structure, I allowed the participants’ responses to guide the interviews, which sometimes presented new questions and new data. This flexible approach to data collection was encouraged by Blumer (1969); the question must be approached “through the eyes and experience [of those who lived it, and the] direction of inquiry, data, analytic relations, and interpretations arise out of, and remain grounded in, the empirical life under study” (p. 139). Because the lived experience of each participant is vital to this study, I remained cognizant that each participant may bring something new, providing opportunities for additional inquiries. For this reason, the interview protocol included multiple prompts to elicit further discussion and I remained flexible in conducting individual interviews.

In order to learn and understand the meanings of issues explored in this research, I asked open-ended questions during the semi-structured interviews. With semi-structured interviews, the researcher is able to obtain comparable data across participants, while also remaining open to additional information or perspectives that may emerge (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). During the initial interviews, I asked the female Muslim students to tell me about themselves and their families. I also asked them to provide information about their
faith, traditions, and practices. In essence, I tried to find out as much as possible about each interviewee (Berg, 2004). Additionally, for participants that wear the hijab, I asked them to explain when they began wearing it, why they began wearing it, and how committed they are to continue wearing the headscarf. I also questioned those participants that do not wear the hijab, why not and what such a stance means to them.

After obtaining some background information, I asked participants to tell me who they are and what it means to be their ethnic background, female, and Muslim. I allowed the participants to fully respond to each question. Rarely did I cut an answer short. At times, I prompted for more detail or returned to a previous question. I was looking for a timeline of development, as well as college experiences that fostered or inhibited personal growth and understanding. Finally, I asked them about their perceptions of their college campuses; friends, faculty and peers; and college experiences in general.

During my initial interviews, I also obtained drawings to express feelings and thoughts about self-concept and numerous documents to illustrate the climate on the campus toward Muslims over the years. At the conclusion of the initial interviews, I asked the student if they had anything to add. I also inquired if there was anything I did not ask that they thought should have been included. I ended each interview by thanking the participant and notifying them that I would be sending them copies of their Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet, personal drawing, and the transcription of their initial interview within several weeks to verify their answers and comments. I also asked them to provide any supporting materials that they thought might help me with further research on this topic.
After transcribing the initial interviews, I emailed participants a thank you note asking them to review the materials and provide me with any additions, deletions or comments, and to schedule a follow-up interview.

I scheduled a follow-up interview to occur after several weeks so that participants had time to reflect upon their responses during the initial interview (see Appendix D for interview protocol). In an effort to get to the heart of their self-perceptions, I provided participants with a copy of their Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet, personal drawing, and a transcript of their initial interview. The follow-up interview provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect upon their initial interview and identity maps, as well as further elaborate on their self-perceptions. This reflective process elicited additional insights and information into the process of establishing identity, the main focus of this research. The follow-up interviews also allowed me to clarify unclear points, discuss participant drawings, and to identify changes in the participants’ responses. These methods allowed me to gather a wide range of information from a diverse group of subjects across multiple situations. Additionally, the interviews showed the diversity and complexity of the participants’ lives. After reflecting upon each of these elements and addressing new questions, all participants stated the interview process and the identity maps allowed them an opportunity to reflect on their identity development.

As with any research method, qualitative or quantitative, there are advantages and disadvantages to conducting individual interviews. A major benefit of conducting one-on-one interviews is that the researcher is able to improvise when answers need more
clarification or lead the conversation down a different path. Furthermore, the data I gathered from the individual interviews helped me see patterns that I subsequently explored more systematically when I conducted additional interviews. However, a major disadvantage was time limitations. Class schedules and co-curriculars presented limitations that did not allow the researcher to probe deep enough on specific issues. Additionally, when participants varied from pre-determined protocol it was sometimes difficult to get the participant back on track. Moreover, many participants hesitated in answering questions, which I assumed was an attempt to find the right words.

Identity Maps

Using visual methods in qualitative research is a means to generate knowledge from the perspective of research participants and enhance research perspectives (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Harper, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2005). Visual methods offer a different view of how individuals make meaning. According to Harper (2002), “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness” (p. 13). Ideas and thoughts that are often censored in speech or hard to express in words are much easier to express in visual images. Ruby (2005) explains that visible and pictorial worlds are social processes intended to communicate something to someone. Therefore, the ability to communicate effectively via symbols is essential because experience is not always directly observable (Polkinghorne, 2005).

I elicited two identity maps (self-pictorial representations) from each participant to explore their potential to reveal unique data about the process of identity development. At the beginning of the initial interview, I obtained the first drawing. I provided each
participant with the Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) worksheet. At the center of the worksheet is the core sense of self, or the most salient personal dimension of identity. The intersecting circles surrounding the core represent the various social identities, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. I asked each participant to plot the various aspects of their identity on the diagram. I was most interested to see where they placed the aspects of ethnicity, gender and religion. I also asked each participant to complete the brief questionnaire asking about the personal attributes and characteristics that define who they are (see Appendix E for sample worksheet).

After each participant completed the worksheet and the initial interview, I asked participants to design a self-pictorial representation of their identity. Trying not to dictate what the students should draw, I asked each participant to ‘Draw your self’ or answer the question ‘Who am I?’ I assured them that they simply had to do the best they could. I further explained any image they created is simply another expression of their feelings and thoughts about how they see themselves. I provided each participant with an 8.5” x 11” sheet of white paper and a variety of drawing materials (color pencils with erasers, color markers, or crayons). The goal was to have the participants portray themselves however they saw fit. They could depict themselves literally or abstractly. The participants selected drawing materials and represented the way they see themselves. Leaving the instructions open-ended, I encouraged participants to reflect upon the ideas presented in the interview and express any additional feelings or emotions they have about themselves. During this process, I refrained from making any comments that might influence the content of their drawings.
After the initial interview, participants received copies of their multiple dimensions of identity worksheets and drawings. During the follow-up interview, I asked the participants to describe these self-pictorial representations. Participants reflected on how they represented themselves bringing to light the nuances and ambiguities that inform their self-perceptions. They described the relevancy of their various social identities as they related to their core sense of self. Upon review of the Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheets, the participants frequently saw relationships between and among multiple dimensions of identity. Four of seven participants rated gender and then ethnicity as the most prominent aspects of their identity after religion. The other three participants rated ethnicity and then gender as most significant after religion. Through evaluating and challenging their images of self, participants were able to express unexamined uncertainties, disagreements and connections around their identity. Furthermore, the process of discussing their identity maps helped participants draw new meanings of self and restructure old ones.

Drawing upon Banks’ (2001) understanding of the internal and external narrative of images and believing drawings reflect the culture of which we are a part of, viewing the participants’ drawings was a dynamic process of interactive knowledge creation. Throop (2003) asserted that drawing is a phenomenological experience capturing the “real-time reflective unfolding of social action” (p. 235). Merleau-Ponty (2002) asserted the mind and body are inseparable and researchers need to work with individuals in a way that embraces this connection. Phenomenology is about getting as close to other people’s perceptions and experiences as possible (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Therefore, this process allows both drawer
and the audience to understand more about the phenomenon being studied. While Katz and Csordas (2003) urge analysis of the social relationship between researcher and participant, the analysis of the drawings focused primarily on the participants’ interpretations of their own drawings. For most participants the process was empowering allowing them the creative opportunity to express and explore who they are. Few participants approached the assignments with trepidation.

**Documents**

Using public documents as the tertiary form of data collection, I examined the institutional mission statement, student newspaper articles, Associated Press articles, and television programs that represent the environmental climate participants reside in. In document research, the major issues involve locating materials and possibly obtaining permission to use them (Creswell, 2007). Since the institutional mission statement, newspaper articles and television programs are public information, it was easy to obtain copies via the internet.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), when using documents as a source of data “it is important to try and understand the perspective of the authors, how they make sense out of their world, themselves, and others and how these meanings were shaped” (p. 65). The major focus of the study was on perceptions of self and how these perceptions might influence, or be influenced by, social interactions. Therefore, reviewing documents allowed me to gain a sense of the overall campus climate in regards to possible preexisting real or imagined stereotypes and biases that may influence social interactions, as well as
environmental factors, such as institutional supports and challenges that may foster or inhibit identity development.

Data Analysis

I employed several techniques described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and van Manen (1990) to analyze the data. Designed to elicit rich, detailed accounts of identity development, I began with a research question and a theoretical framework to help understand the essence of identity negotiation during college for late adolescent Muslim women. According to Glesne (1999), “data analysis involves what the researcher had seen, heard, and read so that he/she can make sense of what he/she learned” and also requires categorizing, synthesizing, searching for patterns and interpreting the data (p. 130). To fulfill this goal, I employed inductive data analysis and analyzed individual interviews, drawings, and related documents to find patterns and establish thematic categories.

Creswell (2007) describes inductive data analysis as a process for making sense of field data. According to Thomas (2003), there are three primary purposes of this process:

1. To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format;
2. To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and
3. To develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes, which are evident in the raw data. (p. 238)

Qualitative researchers use inductive data analysis because it allows them to identify patterns in the data and to connect the patterns to themes. "When we analyze a phenomenon, we are
trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79).

The experiences reported by the participants reflect their levels of adaptation and integration into their campus community. In addition, constructing this research influenced my assumptions and perceptions of their reflective experiences. According to Van Manen (1990) since “phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience” (p.79) he suggested considering data “in terms of meaning units, structures of meaning, or themes” (p. 78). Guided by the work of van Manen (1990), I approached the data analysis from different directions to uncover similarities. Emerging themes were evaluated within and across interviews.

The phenomenological method maintains a holistic approach to data analysis. In this study, I transcribed the interviews in their entirety. As soon as I completed transcribing the interviews, I read each transcript in order to make sense of the data and gain initial insight about each participant. With the goal of uncovering nuggets of meaning, I initially approached data analysis with complete objectivity and openness. Using open coding, I identified codes without any restrictions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). During the second reading, I made marginal notes to record personal suppositions and potential emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using the conceptual framework, I highlighted sections of data that reflected the language, meaning and thought of social interactions, as well as the various social aspects of the participants’ identities. Drawing upon my education and professional experience in student development, I continued to read the transcripts one at a
Boeije (2002) describes the constant comparative method as inductive data analysis. The main principle of this method is constantly comparing data from one interview to other sets of data. Employing inductive analysis, I analyzed, coded and categorized the data about the Muslim female students’ identity and college experiences, especially in regards to interpretations of and meanings attributed to social interactions (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). I looked for concepts, themes, patterns, and categories inferred from the data. Identifying several consistent ideas that emerged from the data after numerous readings of the transcripts, I created thematic codes.

Following the constant comparison method, I was able to compare, code, categorize and describe tentative categories. Looking through the lens of symbolic interactionism and multiple dimensions of identity, I identified meaningful statements that emerged with some consistency from the participants’ language and thoughts. With each reading, I confirmed and refined some concepts and discarded others. Using Boeije’s (2002) suggestions, I asked questions such as, “What are the similarities and differences between the participants’ comments to the same questions?” Reading the transcripts again, I looked for meaning in clusters of words and sentences, highlighting and labeling relevant sections. I continued to code and attempted to link the emerging concepts and themes.

To analyze the identity map drawings, I used Rose’s (2001) critical visual methodology framework. Rose (2001) suggests three modalities for the analysis of images:
technological (materials used), compositional (images featured), and social (meaning in the social context viewed). I used the compositional and social modalities for the participants’ multiple dimensions of identity worksheets and all three modalities to analyze the ‘draw your self’ illustrations. Thus, I reviewed the images featured, as well as returned to the interview transcripts to obtain how the participants described the meaning of their own drawings.

I did not use any specialized computer program to assist with the analysis of the data. Instead, I read and hand-coded interview transcripts three times in their entirety and then returned to re-analyze certain sections as necessary. Establishing meaningful codes, I developed an intricate system of color-coding to mark new patterns. Multiple readings helped me focus themes that seemed unrelated by sorting, rearranging and combining them with one another. With the final set of primary themes and secondary concepts, I was ready to present the data on how Muslim women negotiate their identity and interpret social interactions and experiences during college.

Trustworthiness

Researchers must take credibility and trustworthiness seriously. Credibility and trustworthiness is about explaining how the researcher conducts research and whether the data collected are legitimate (Creswell, 2007; Krathwohl, 1998; Mertens, 2005). As to the credibility of the study, Mertens (2005) acknowledged that in “qualitative research, the credibility test asks if there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (p. 254). It is important for researchers to use as many strategies to achieve credibility and
trustworthiness as possible. However, no amount of any trustworthiness technique could fully persuade acceptance of the results. Therefore, I implemented triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking, as well as clarification of researcher’s bias and rich, thick description in order to establish credibility and trustworthiness for the study.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is one method to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the research data. Using more than one source of information strengthens the conclusions and leads to a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Krathwohl, 2007; Mertens, 2005). Triangulating multiple sources of data and different methods of data collection enabled me to compare the information I gathered. In this way, I was able to identify emerging categories and to explore them in more depth.

**Peer Debriefing**

Creswell (2007) describes peer debriefing as an external check of the research process. Three primary purposes of peer debriefing include increasing the credibility of the research, providing opportunities to test the patterns and themes that are developed, and helping to reflect on factors that might affect the researcher’s judgments (Krathwohl, 1998; Mertens, 2005). For my study, I engaged in extended discussions with a disinterested peer concerning findings, conclusions, analysis, and hypotheses. Sharing my knowledge of Islam and Muslim culture, symbolic interactionism, student development theory, and campus climates, my own ideas about how to present the data emerged. My peer helped me maintain consistency of codes and categories and helped me clarify my thoughts by asking questions
and playing devil’s advocate. Peer debriefing allowed me to confirm every process through my peer’s critical evaluation.

**Member Checking**

“Member checking is the most important criterion in establishing credibility” (Mertens, 2005, p. 255). Member checking refers to the process of sharing transcriptions and the drafts of the final report with research participants in order to ensure proper representation of them and their ideas (Creswell, 2007). In addition to validating content and research interpretation, member checking allows researchers to obtain more information. Several weeks after each interview, during initial analysis, and at the conclusion of data analysis, member checks took place. This process included asking participants to verify what I understood from their words. Discussing the meanings and understandings of the participants’ comments revealed no major discrepancies between the data analysis and the participants’ understanding of their identity development. Thus, implementing member checks improved my findings by increasing the trustworthiness of my study.

**Generalizability – Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability**

Generalizability in qualitative research is similar to external validity in quantitative research. In the constructivist paradigm, every instance is an example of both the uniqueness of the individual and the universality of the larger group (Mertens, 2005). Therefore, it becomes the burden of the reader to determine the degree of similarity to his or her own case.

Transferability refers to allowing the reader to transfer information to different settings (Creswell, 2007). In my study, I achieved transferability through rich, thick
description. I present the reader with sufficient details of the time, place, context and culture of the diversity of participants and their institution. In the constructivist paradigm change is expected. According to Mertens (2005), when change occurs, the researcher must track and inspect the change. By sharing transcripts and the results with participants and using member checking, I achieved a level of dependability. This process created a level of stability and quality to the results. As for confirmability, or minimizing the level of researcher bias, I kept a research journal, and audio-recorded data, created clusters and themes, processed notes and established a “chain of evidence” (Yin, 1994 as cited in Mertens, 2005, p. 257) that further confirms trustworthiness.

**Researcher’s Role and Ethical Considerations**

Glesne (1999) proposed that researchers are learners, using their senses and abilities during data collection. Even though I provided a short demographics questionnaire, I essentially used myself as the instrument (Creswell, 2007), conducting semi-structured interviews. While I recognized the participants as experts and aimed to learn from and with them, I wondered if they would be accepting of me, a white Italian American woman with little knowledge about Islam or Muslim culture. As a life-long learner, I spent a large amount of time actively listening to the participants, as well as answering their questions about me. Sharing my background and interests, as well as my eager desire to learn about them enabled me to build trustworthy relationships with the participants.

However, while I truly enjoyed socializing with these students, I was aware of my obligation to protect the undergraduate women who participated in my study. This obligation
undoubtedly brought up ethical considerations. Since I employed a phenomenological research design to gain an understanding of human perceptions and actions, ethics in every phase of research was an integral part of my study (Mertens, 2005). According to Creswell (2007), “we always need to be sensitive to the potential of our research to disturb the site and potentially (and often unintentionally) exploit the vulnerable populations we study” (p. 44). Therefore, three major issues were essential: informed consent, right to privacy, and protection from harm.

In order to protect my participants, I explained the purpose of the research, the procedures of data collection, analysis, and its use. I made sure that all participants understood my explanations and before collecting any data, I received signed consent forms from each participant. Mertens (2005) explains maintaining confidentiality as methods to protect the identity of participants and in the handling of the data they provide. To preserve the confidentiality of my participants, I used pseudonyms and omitted the names of specific items and institutions that may be identifiable when I transcribed the interviews, as well as in the construction of the final report. As for the data, I kept all interview transcripts, notes, and other materials on a computer that only I had access to in my residence. I also kept a list indicating actual participant names in a separate, secure place at my residence. As per IRB guidelines, I intend to destroy the data at the conclusion of my research.

In regards to protecting my participants from harm, I notified them if at any time they felt uncomfortable they could stop the interview, refrain from answering questions and drop out of the study completely. I promised participants, any reporting that arose from this
research project would not identity their names or other information that can be linked
directly back to them. I also informed them that I would remove any identifying imagery
from their identity maps. Finally, I kept conscientious, friendly and respectful relationships
with all participants and encouraged them to help me direct my dissertation to areas of
special interest to them based on their own experiences at college.

**Limitations of the Research**

This study has a number of limitations. Having little knowledge about Islam and
Muslim culture, I found it difficult to establish appropriate questions to get to the root of my
inquiry. Being a social justice advocate, I was aware that my own personal values and beliefs
could potentially influence the way I worded my questions or the overall nature of the
investigation. I took every possible step to ensure I prevented myself from using leading
questions and biases from influencing the findings and conclusions. I reminded myself that I
was conducting a phenomenological study and my main objective was to give these Muslim
women voice and present the essence of their lived college experiences.

Another limitation was gaining trust. Not being Muslim, I relied heavily on my
contact at the MSA at the research site. Most of my interactions were with the president of
the organization. While I attended several MSA meetings, it was difficult to gain these
women’s trust. I was open and upfront with the participants answering any questions they
had about me and/or my research. Additionally, other female Muslim students vouched for
me as an individual and a researcher enabling a level of trust and participation in the study.
Additionally, the number (seven) of Muslim women limited the study. The exclusion of
certain potential participants resulted in a loss of potentially rich descriptions of the process of identity development. Therefore, this is not a representative sample of the entire Muslim female student population of this university or in the United States. More students would have provided multiple perspectives, enabling a greater understanding of the essence of identity development for Muslim women during college.

Finally, there are limitations to qualitative research. Due to the nature of individual lived experience, the findings may not have a theoretical meaning that research seeks to uncover (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). Identity development occurs during adolescence and throughout the lifespan. Limited by time and space, I was unable to cover all aspects of the participants’ ethnic, gender and religious identities. Furthermore, since reflective interpretation colors the recollection of the original event (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002), the oral histories of the participants alters the original experience; and thus the meaning of the original event(s).

**Overview of the Chapter**

I utilized a constructivist paradigm and conducted a phenomenological research approach to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women and how they construct meaning. Because of the vast diversity within the Muslim population, I used purposeful sampling to gain insight into this population. Due to time constraints, I used snowball sampling to select participants who met the criteria of identifying as Muslim, being between the ages of 18 and 22, and currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. I used semi-structured interviews, identity maps, and document analysis to collect data. I also used
inductive data analysis and the constant comparative method to create categories and themes. Finally, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I used triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Late adolescent Muslim females encounter a unique set of identity exploration challenges during college. A study of their identity negotiation revealed conflicts, reflections and resolutions as these young women work toward achieving a deeper meaning of who they are and who they want to become. What the participants shared was stimulating and inspiring. The interviews were enjoyable as I was able to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Islamic faith and develop a professional relationship with participants. Through sharing their perspectives, emotions and dreams, the participants conveyed their personal stories. Given their diverse backgrounds, it is no wonder we see both similarities and differences of perceptions and opinions on a variety of issues. Facing a wide array of freedoms and opportunities during college, these women remain deeply connected to their Islamic faith, often using their values and beliefs to guide their actions. This chapter presents their sense of self, understanding of differences, and the innumerable complexities of relationships. From what the participants shared, we can hope to understand the reality of identity development and foster positive growth during college.

Review of the Research Design

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how Muslim females navigate their social interactions and negotiate perceptions of self as college students. The main research question for this study was what is the nature of identity development during college for late adolescent Muslim female students? The participants of this study are self-identified Muslim undergraduates. Largely based on two semi-structured interviews with
seven Muslim women, combined with identity maps (self-pictorial representations) and document analysis, this study explored the highly personal and uniquely conceptualized nature of identity development, especially in a post 9/11 American society where there is increased media attention and scrutiny of the Muslim population. In particular, this study made an effort to discover and understand how colleges foster or inhibit their development. The data were analyzed using the social-psychological theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism in conjunction with the multiple dimensions of identity model. Since individuals derive understanding of themselves and others during social interactions, language, thought and meaning were used to analysis the data. These frameworks were also used to acknowledge the different aspects of identity, specifically ethnicity, gender and religion, and examine the contextual influences that affect identity development.

**Participant Characteristics**

Characteristics of the participants were derived from demographic questionnaires, identity maps, and interviews. From a phenomenological point of view, participant characteristics are presented in composite form to ensure the overall meaning of lived experience rather than placing focus on the individual participant. Additionally, using individual descriptions might jeopardize participant confidentiality and anonymity.

All seven participants self-defined as Sunni Muslims, single and never married, middle-class, and heterosexual. The participants are diverse based on age, race/ethnicity, academic year, and family collegiate history. Two participants are 20 years old, four participants are 19 years old, and one participant is 18 years old. As for ethnic background,
two participants are Bangladeshi, two are Pakistani, and there was one student descendant of Arab, Bosnian, and Pakistani/Indian culture each. Three participants were born outside the United States. One participant moved to the U.S. before the age of one, one at the age of four and one at the age of eight. Six participants are in-state students, while one is an out-of-state student from the Midwestern United States. Four of the in-state students are from the local area, while two are from surrounding areas. Three participants are sophomores, three participants are juniors and one participant is a senior. The participants vary in their placement in the lineage of family members attending college. One participant is a first-generation student, three participants are second-generation students, two participants are third-generation students and one participant comes from a family with a long history of attending college. Four participants wear the hijab (head covering or Muslim style of dress for modesty and privacy); three do not.

**Emergent Themes**

Interviews, identity maps and documents gave me the opportunity to identify certain patterns and themes that appeared frequently across participants. Using the constant comparative method, I analyzed each set of transcripts comparing codes, categorizing comments, and describing tentative emergent themes. Reaching a deeper more applicable meaning, I found it important to compare and contrast common issues on ethnicity, religious practices and traditions, gender roles, social interactions and managing differences. Significant statements describing the meanings attributed to self and interactions with others emerged with some consistency to describe the development, maintenance and negotiation of
their ethnic, gender, and religious identities during college. After formulating relative categories, I developed final meanings based upon the interpretation of the data, careful to use the participant’s words. To gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of identity development among undergraduate Muslim women, I also used identity maps (self-pictorial representations) and document analysis in support of the interviews.

Analyzing the data according to van Manen’s (1990) method of “free imaginative variation” (p. 107), I was able to make certain the themes fundamentally belonged to the phenomenon under investigation. Interpretation of the themes required a level of abstraction. Looking at the themes as a whole, I expounded meanings yielding the true essence of the phenomenon of identity development. Through the process of intuiting, the data went beyond the words of the participants to a level of abstraction increasing the meaningfulness (van Manen, 1990). More importantly, helping participants come to new, deeper meaning in their lives was, and will continue to be, important for liberating them from negative social labels and hegemonies.

**Document Analysis**

Documents collected for analysis included: institutional mission statement, 16 student newspaper articles, numerous Associated Press articles, and two transcripts from the *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* television program. Document analysis refers to the process of making sense and meaning out of the data collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007). I had a choice to either analyze all data (transcripts, identity maps and documents) or organize the document analysis around the themes I found in common among the participants’ comments.
I chose to reach deeper and apply more meaning by analyzing the documents after the initial findings were identified.

The interview transcripts and identity maps gave me the opportunity to identify certain patterns and themes that appear frequently. Using the constant comparative method, I studied the transcripts and began to see more and more similarities among the participants’ comments. Initially, I did not think I collected much data, but after creating themes and blocking the data into the three major categories, I began to feel more comfortable with the information. From the overwhelming data collected, commonalities among the participants in self-perception, social interactions and influential people, organizations, and events became apparent.

Taking the common, emergent themes determined from analyzing the interviews, I began to analyze the documents. The participants referred to or provided quite a few documents. For the most part, the institutional mission statement highlights education, creativity and personal responsibility. The statement does not mention diversity or citizenship as integral to the mission. As for the student newspaper articles, they support the participants’ views of the campus culture and highlight the tensions that arise from a diverse campus community. However, they also show the institutional administration is working toward building a more accepting and inclusive campus culture. This supports the participants’ views that the campus is welcoming and while there are differences they feel neither threatened nor uncomfortable. Additionally, the student newspaper seems to be a tool
to enhance dialogues and increase awareness of the many facets of Muslim culture and individual opinions.

The Associated Press articles highlight the continued misperceptions and struggles of building a multicultural global community. Through the eyes of popular media, the world continues to judge the Muslim population and paint pictures of extremists. Muslim youth must overcome many obstacles as they work towards achieving a positive sense of self. Educating others at the same time they are learning more about themselves, Muslim youth realize it is the responsibility of all people to accept and celebrate diversity and encourage others to appreciate multiple perspectives in society.

Finally, the television transcripts discuss the institution’s decision to assign *Approaching The Qur'an: The Early Revelations* as summer reading for incoming freshmen. The first interview speaks with individuals directly connected to the institution. It highlights various viewpoints from the administration, professors and scholars, as well as students. The second interview discusses the various interpretations of the Qur’an and the teaching of Islam. These two interviews support the comments made by the participants who attend this institution. Because there is great diversity within the Muslim population, as well as the entire campus community, multiple viewpoints are expected and appreciated.

Using document analysis, I was able to gain a better understanding of the nuances within the Muslim population, campus community and the societal climate in which the participants live. These documents represent mainstream attitudes toward the Muslim population and further illustrate the many challenges late adolescent female Muslims face in
constructing and presenting their identity. Reviewing documents allowed me to gain a sense of the overall campus climate in regards to preexisting real or imagined stereotypes and biases that have the potential to influence social interactions, as well as environmental factors, such as institutional supports and challenges that foster or inhibit identity development. The institutional documents confirm the participants’ view that the college campus is supportive of the Muslim population and is interested in educating students about Islam to eradicate stereotypes and misconceptions. However, just as the participants identified within their interviews, there is still much work to be done.

**Research Findings**

This section includes a comprehensive discussion of the meanings of multiple dimensions of identity and the influences of social and academic environments during college. The analyses of gathered data serve to answer the research question and broaden the understanding of the lived experience of identity development. All seven female Muslim undergraduates reported recognizing the importance of the exploration of and commitment to personal beliefs, values, and goals in the development of their identity. They also highlighted maintaining autonomy and striving for improved interpersonal relationships as a key component for growth. Using a religious interpretative lens, the participants make meaning of self and their interactions with others. What follows is a composite description, including verbatim examples taken from interview transcripts and the multiple dimensions of identity worksheets, of what the women perceive as key to their own identity development.
The data revealed three major themes, as shown in Figure 2, that students relate to the nature of identity development. The essential themes that emerged are identity is fluid and
Identity is Fluid and Dynamic

Identity exploration and commitment is a fluid and dynamic process. Negotiating identity throughout adolescence and into early adulthood, the participants face many personal choices and social pressures as they construct and reconstruct their identity. Female Muslim undergraduates actively develop their ethnic, gender and religious identities during college as a result of being challenged, accepted, or rejected by others. The process, while similar in
some instances and vastly different in others, is a search for self and the crafting of self as a unique individual. All seven participants discussed explorations of their identities and their perceptions of how they fit into the world around them.

**Childhood Upbringing and Family Influence**

Childhood upbringing and family influence exert an enduring influence on the participants’ self-concept. The participants indicated the way their parents raised them and their interactions with siblings and other family members significantly influenced their patterns of thinking about themselves and their ways of interacting with others. Drawing upon their childhoods, six of the seven participants reflected upon growing up in a Muslim household. “I was born as a Muslim. My parents are Muslim. I’ve grown up with Muslim values and rules.” Conversely, one study member indicated, “I didn’t really have a sense of a Muslim community back home where I grew up. It was more a Bangladeshi community. I think that’s probably why my parents always emphasize Bangladeshi values.”

Discussing ethnic and cultural values, one participant born outside of the United States shared, “My first language is Bengali. If people talk to me for even one day they will know that I’m from Bangladesh and that’s a big part of my identity.” A fellow student grew up in a Midwestern Bangladeshi community where her parents placed great emphasis on Bangladeshi values. “It’s an important part of how I was raised and I think I can see the benefits of preserving Bangladeshi culture in me.” Another study member said, “I was raised in a traditional Pakistani/Indian household. Whether it’s the food you eat or the language you speak, I still hold pretty strongly to that.”
In contrast, one participant admitted she only maintains her ethnic culture and language when in the company of her family. “When I go home, I’ll watch the Arabic channel with my parents. I’ll talk to my parents in Arabic. But I don’t think it’s really affected me as much.” Similarly, while another undergraduate indicated ethnicity holds little importance, she did understand how it has shaped who she is today. “The way you speak to your elders is very formal. In Pakistan you are constantly reminded that you always have to be respectful of everybody.”

One study member, also raised with Pakistani values and customs, expressed inner turmoil about her true ethnic heritage. “I’m Pakistani but I have a crisis because my grandparents came from India and then after the partition they moved to Pakistan. So, I’m Pakistani but when I want to go to my ancestor’s home it’s in India.” Even though she loves to visit Pakistan, she confessed, “It’s an amazing country but I don’t have a certain pride of being Pakistani just because I’m not that related.”

**Parental expectations.**

Regardless of the boundaries of parental cultural and religious teachings, some participants feel pressure to meet their parents’ career and future expectations. “My parents want me to get a really good education,” shared one participant. Openly discussing how much her parents value a good education, being financially stable and happy, she explained how influential witnessing her father provide medical care in Bangladesh was to her decision to become a physician as well.
We went to his village and there are people suffering from vitamin C deficiency who don’t have eyesight and he gave them free healthcare and helped them out. And even the simplest things help them so much and they’re so grateful and it made me realize that the world is so much bigger than me. There are so many people I have to help and they really need it. So I feel that is so important to me, it’s like one of my biggest values.

With great respect for her parents, another participant worries about aligning her career interests with her parent’s demands for medicine.

They’re the typical Desis and they want you to be successful but in the way that they want you to be successful – which is always medicine. Always a health field.

Doctors are always preferable. But it’s become this kind of leverage point. A social kind of marker. I’m not necessarily sure about that.

In sharing her father’s hardships as a youth, she came to understand why her parents stress a solid education, especially in the medical field.

My dad was orphaned – not exactly but his dad passed away when he was eight years old. That’s what they called orphaned – if your father dies. So, basically he was orphaned from a very young age. His mom had to work and he never had a very stable family dynamic. I think they’re all just worried about making a living here.

That’s always the overarching kind of thing.

Rather than going against her parents wishes, another study member settled on attending the same college as her older sister. “I never did a college search to find out where
I really, really, really wanted to go because I knew that if I got into [institution] my parents would want me to go [there].” Upon further reflection she added, “I was ok with it at the time. I mean, I understood why they wanted me too.” Conversely, the parents of another participant may appear strict or overbearing to an outsider but she welcomed their input. “They’re just trying to give advice and trying to see if I’ll follow it. I definitely question it. I follow it. I question it. I mean it’s totally situational depending on what they are saying.”

**Family relationships.**

Maintaining healthy relationships with family members is essential to the participants’ exploration of self. Relishing supportive environments at home, the participants share close bonds with parents and siblings. Regardless of family background or childhood upbringing, they each look up to family members and prefer seeking advice and guidance from them rather than any other source.

In discussing the value of family, one study participant expressed, “That’s really big. I don’t mean only Bangladeshi, but also Muslim culture. Relationship with your family is pretty much emphasized.” A fellow student highlighted the importance of family within the Islamic religion. “Parents are very important to me. In Islam, respecting your parents and your family in general is very central. So, I try to hold fast to that because it’s really easy to put yourself before your family.” Likewise, another study member understands how important her family relationships are and vows to continue her devotion throughout her life. “I love my parents. I know that I am going to take care of them when I am older. I’m not going to throw them in some nursing home. I know that I will provide for them.” Truly
adhering to the bonds of family, another participant expressed that talking about your family to others is taboo. “Other people can let things slip and you can’t trust them the way you can trust you’re family. Nobody knows you’re family, like your family.”

Three participants spoke of their relationships with their fathers. Seeking guidance, one participant said, “My dad, he’s not a scholar, but he’s fairly knowledgeable. He’s well versed in the religion and in general knowledge.” Having lived through a war in her home country of Bosnia as a young child, a fellow student recalled how destruction brought her family closer together.

My dad was a prisoner of the war. He had to live on his own and he went through a very hard time. He lost a lot of weight. He almost died a couple of times. When he came to the area where my mom and I were, I wouldn’t talk to him for the longest time because he was so thin. I didn’t think he was my dad. I couldn’t recognize him. I felt like he was angry with God for separating him from my mom and me and our family. It was very hard for him because my mom and I were very close based on religion too. He wasn’t practicing for a very long time. Then, when I started going to college, I started practicing more. Things just got really better with our family for some reason. My dad started practicing more and the three of us would practice together, go to the mosque together, get up, and fast. You could feel the sense of family and God reuniting us.

In contrast, another participant’s parents divorced because of their failure to share religious interests. “It made me realize all that stuff…the whole big house, family…it’s not all that
important. It’s about other things. It’s about patience and everything. And I’m actually a lot happier than I think I was before.”

Half of the participants spoke of their mothers affectionately. “I’m really close to my mom. My dad was always around but he had work and my mom was a stay at home mom. So, I saw her all the time. She worked so hard for us.” With great admiration for her mother, she added, “She’s very cultural, so me and my sister are too. She’s very caring, very compassionate. I feel like she knows how to relate to other people. I think she knows exactly how to act around others.” Also holding her mother in high regard, another undergraduate blindly followed her mother’s conversion to Islam and became fascinated with the practice of wearing the hijab.

She started wearing a scarf when I was eight and I saw her and I started wearing a scarf too, even though I didn’t have to wear it until I was 13 or 14. But I was just so into it. So I converted with her even though I was too young to know exactly what I was doing.

Recalling an Islamic story about the importance of having a good relationship with your mother, a fellow study member talked about her own relationship with her mother. “My relationship with my mom is solid as a rock. My relationship with my mom is definitely a definition of who I am as well.” Another student reflected on how a childhood decision that separated her parents intensified her feelings toward her mother.

My dad lived in Saudi Arabia for four years. My family was thinking about moving there. I was the one who said, “No I don’t want to move.” My mom was pretty
much by herself because I was busy with school or whatever and my dad was by himself. It was a really selfish decision on my part to be like I don’t want to move because I’m used to being here. In hindsight, it was one of those things that I got a lot out of it; in the sense that it was really hard and it was really tough and I didn’t really treat my mom the way I really should have. I should have been there more. That influenced a lot of how I act now because I realize how much of an effect that had and I saw it first hand.

While the siblings of the students varied, three participants commented on their relationships with their sisters. While they each have good relationships with their parents, they gravitate towards their sisters for guidance and support. For personal advice one participant indicated, “I would first go to my sister. She’s the most likely to listen and the most likely not to judge.” Sharing a special bond with her older sister, a fellow student shared, “My sister has always been a role model for me. She has definitely inspired me and taught me a lot. She has given me a lot of support. She’s been like a sister and a mom all in one.” Another study member cherishes her relationship with her sister, who is seven years her junior.

She says she is always looking up to me, but in a way, I look up to her too because there are things that I tend to forget when I’m in college. I’m always stressed out but when I am with her, it’s just easy to relax and remember how it is to be carefree.
Through her self-pictorial representation, she continued to reflect on how much she values and respects each member of her family, as well as her intentions to incorporate valued aspects of each family member into her own self-concept (see Figure 3).

Expounding on the idea of family relationships, one participant came to understand the importance of valuing close connections with her family members while still maintaining an independent sense of self. “When my grandmother died my grandfather had a lot of problems. He went into total depression. It was interesting to watch him…to see how important relationships are because his life totally changed without her.”

Finally, one participant stressed that regardless of the bonds she shares with her parents, her connection with God comes before everything else. “The relationship with God
is always number one. Relationships with parents are always after that because obviously God brought them here. How else would you have this if it wasn’t for the creator?”

**Introduction to New People and Ideas Prior to College**

The earliest stages of development for participants occurred in the immediate wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Having to navigate ignorance and misperceptions at the same time that they were trying to discover who they are and make friendships helped shape and mold who they would become. Ethnic, gender, and religious social structures and the participants’ locations in the convoluted web of multiple aspects of self influenced their interpretations of these early experiences.

During their most formative years, the participants navigated the fear and ignorance of the people within their communities and the world around them. One participant explained how fellow classmates treated her as an outsider, even insinuating that she might be a terrorist. “It was a daily occurrence for people to ask me where Osama was. Or where he was hiding. Or if he was related to me.” Moving from the Northeast to the Midwest, another student described her experiences with classmates. “When 9/11 happened everybody was like ‘Well, your last name is …. are you a terrorist?’”

Several participants also faced the ignorance of adults during this time. Attending a public middle school after spending her entire early education years in a private Islamic school was horrifying for one participant. She described walking into school with her mother for the first time and seeing the ignorance of others first hand.
We walked into this school to register and even the two receptionists – it’s supposed to be this really great magnet school – look at each other and wordlessly pass us the [ESL] sheet. I was asking my mother, “Should I show them the test scores that I got?” And she was like “No they have them on file.” We filled the sheet out. We obviously said that I didn’t need English as a second language.

Half way through the year, she learned they didn’t have her test scores and she was in both the lower math and English classes. Upset that she was missing crucial instruction, she declared, “After that, I was like I’m spending my last year back in my private school.” For another participant, being a trained peer leader supervising her high school residence hall, she was in constant communication with the parents of her peers. She soon recognized some parents were misinformed and felt intimidated by her. “I had to be in communication with a lot of the parents. A lot of them came from smaller towns and probably never saw a Muslim in their life. So I could tell that they were taken aback by that.” Fostering a community where residents were tolerant and respectful of others she added, “I think their daughters would express that it’s cool. After a while of talking to [the parents], they were ok with [me being Muslim].”

While middle school presented challenges to their Muslim identity, high school granted the opportunity to correct others’ misperceptions. Attending a public baccalaureate high school, one participant reflected on how hard it was to get to know people and try to get inside their circle of friends. “The kind of personalities that I met there were very different – very open and very welcoming, even though not too many knew about Islamic people.”
Wanting to help others learn more about herself and Islam, she was upset that they kept their questions to themselves, even though they were very curious.

I remember this one girl started asking about Islam and I was answering her questions. I think I was hesitating because I was trying to think about how to answer her questions and somebody else was like, “Why [do] you keep asking her about her religion. Stop.” And then she basically stopped asking and [I was] like no, no – keep asking. Because that’s the only way to eliminate these kinds of stereotypes.

Another study member attended a boarding school for her final two years of high school. Recalling how difficult it was to leave the house at fifteen, she commented on being the only Muslim in the school. “I spent most of my time with non-Muslims. Day and night hanging out with them.” While she was different than the other thirty girls on the hall, she was comfortable with herself and never hesitated to help others understand more about her religion. “When it came up, I would talk to them about it. I mean, they would see me pray and they would be like ‘Oh, what’s that?’ And we’d talk about it.” Conversely for a fellow student growing up in the Midwest, being the only Muslim in her high school was interesting but did not leave any deep scars. She simply expressed, “When people knew I was Muslim, it was just like ‘She’s kind of normal or whatever.’” Similarly, another participant attended a private residential high school and served as a resident advisor, which increased her self-confidence. “I really loved it. I got to know my residents. It’s really nice to have a community – to help build a community.”
Several participants had to find a balance between their Islamic virtues and that of American society. Islamic doctrine forbids touching and interacting with members of the opposite gender. One participant recalled trying to explain this to her guidance counselor, who eventually did help her get excused from doing physical activities with boys.

I remember telling my guidance counselor all this and she was like “Well, we haven’t had problems with other Muslims.” And I was like “Well people practice their faith in different ways. And, what can I say; maybe it’s more of a problem for me.” And she was like, “Ok, you’re a fundamentalist then right?” And I couldn’t believe that she just said that. I was like, “No! I just practice …” And then she was a little embarrassed. Afterwards you could tell she was trying to cover that up. Obviously, maybe she didn’t want me to hear that; maybe it was just involuntarily she said it or something. But, I was like “Wow, you just let slip probably what you actually think.”

For another study member, modesty and wearing the hijab are very important. While she never had to worry about boys in her high school residence hall, she did recall an incident that made her very uncomfortable, even though it wasn’t anyone’s fault directly.

I remember taking pictures on hall and I didn’t have my scarf on. I always told my friends you can’t really show [the pictures publicly]…please delete them. But, one picture ended up on the end of the year slideshow and I was crying and I was really depressed.

Other participants also recalled learning to deal with conflicts and overcome differences. Reflecting back on her middle school experiences, one participant said, “I guess
it really was a learning experience. I think I really lost my sense of innocence when I went
there because all my naiveté just went out the window.” Another undergraduate indicated
the support of Sunday school classes helped buffer the misperceptions of others. “My
teachers there were amazing. Every time I had a question, they wouldn’t judge me. They
would just tell me what I wanted to hear and keep it confidential and private.” Another study
member explained being around non-Muslims helped her learn more about herself. “I just
knew that I really liked people because whether its Muslim, non-Muslim, whatever, I just
like hanging out with a group of people.”

**Continued Exploration and Increased Awareness during College**

The data indicates college is an important developmental time in participants’ lives as
they form and reform their identities and develop new relationships. Changing
environmental influences and exposure to new people and ideas during college fosters their
re-examination of parental teachings and cultural heritage and the desire to seek additional
knowledge prior to forming their own opinion.

The participants pointed out that the first few days and weeks of college were daunting,
especially when they were not familiar with their peer group. Reflecting on their first days
on campus, the participants illustrate just how hard and trying it was. Coming from a small
high school, one student revealed, “I was really overwhelmed because there were a lot of
people.” Being from out-of-state, another participant said, “I was pretty nervous. I felt like a
lot of people here already knew each other, because it’s a state school.” Even though a
fellow student had an older brother to help direct her along the way, she recalled, “It was
scary. I was on my own to a certain extent. I knew people from high school but I wasn’t really close friends with more than two or three of them.”

Walking around campus for the first time, she was shocked by all the people, especially other Muslims who didn’t adhere to her philosophies. “It was culture shock and I was like what do I do with that?” A fellow study member was also overwhelmed by the amount of people and their lack of inhibitions. “The first experiences were a little bit jarring. I mean I was ready for them but I was like, people really do that in front of everybody?” During the transition to college, another participant volunteered how difficult it was trying to find her place within the campus community. “There was one point where I was so depressed that I didn’t want to stay here. I wanted to transfer to a more liberal school even though this place is so liberal.”

**Student involvement.**

The transition to college occurs as the participants are continuing their search for who they are and how they fit into the world around them. Understanding the importance of student engagement on their construction of self, they indicated that their college experiences simultaneously affirm and challenge the social identities that served them during their earlier constructions of self. Blending personal interests with social endeavors, the participants define their sense of self through student group affiliations.

All seven participants commented on how accepting and welcoming the college campus is toward Muslims. “I feel very comfortable here as a Muslim,” said one participant. “Everyone is really nice to you and treats you the same.” A student from out of state said,
“I’ve never seen anything negative. I’ve never experienced anything negatively. I think there’s a sense of welcoming no matter what.” Likewise another participant added, “It’s a very safe and good community for Muslims. People are accepting.”

Embracing the college experience one participant shared, “I felt so grown up being on this campus.” A student from the local area shared her enthusiasm about college and getting to experience new people and activities. “I was really excited to come to college. I wanted to branch out from the people I already knew.” Branching out from her close Muslim friends and increasing her exposure to different people, another participant said, “When you’re branching out into different organizations and you form close relationships with all sorts of different people, I think it helps me reaffirm what the majority of [the campus community] sees me as.”

Discussing her initial experiences with student clubs one member shared, “I would just try to meet a lot of different people. I would actually practice talking to new people and seeing how I could express myself better.” Reflecting on the value of diversity, another participant explained why she truly appreciates her campus involvement.

I really value all my extra-curriculars because it is a time when I’m not with Muslims 24/7. I think that is crucial to my identity. I think it helps me stay grounded in who I am and not just get caught up in Muslim, Muslim, Muslim. I feel the best, or the most enjoyable times in my life, are when I’m able to do things that aren’t strictly about Islam. I feel being in these extra-curriculars helps me see the culture of my university and I really like that.
Sharing the same sentiment, a fellow study participant explained how beneficial getting involved has been for her development.

Especially the RA job that I took. It really, really, helped me open my eyes and meet these different people that I never met before. It helped me branch out and I really like that. I have residents of all different cultures, types, everything. Whether they’re LGBTQ or from another country or transfer student, they’re all very different.

Actively involved in campus activities, another member understands how integral involvement is to her development. “You have to prioritize and figure out a way to balance everything. Looking at yourself - how you can figure things out? How you can improve yourself? All of that leads to a lot of development.”

Meeting new people and discovering different avenues of communication helped another undergraduate find herself. “College made me think about my identity a lot. College really forced me to think about what I wanted.” Reflecting on the many opportunities to discover yourself during college a fellow study member said, “I found my place at [institution]. Which is probably why I found people that I really like and things I like to do and things that I want to be involved in.” As a Muslim women wearing the headscarf, another student reflected on the realization that she is but one of thousands of students. “I thought maybe people look at you more. But I realized you are in this big mesh of thousands of people and nobody really cares. Everyone’s busy going to where they need to go to. That was very surprising.”
As the days progressed, many participants came to realize just how diverse the college campus truly was and slowly found their comfort level. After attending a multicultural event, one participant realized she still had to learn how to interact with a wider variety of individuals.

I went to [this event] last year where random people from throughout the college get together for one week in a retreat center and they have these really, really hard discussions about identity and what they believe in. It was a shock for me. I was so uncomfortable. At the beginning I was so scared to say [anything] because I’d be in a group of ten people and they all believed one thing and I as a Muslim had a totally opposite belief. That was really eye opening for me and it made me feel stronger about talking about who I am without hurting other people and just the whole situation of talking with other people because we’re usually in our [own] bubbles. Just as she found comfort having deep conversations with diverse others, another undergraduate indicated meeting Muslims and non-Muslims alike have been very fruitful. “I’ve had a lot of understanding. I definitely feel this campus is very open to people and their beliefs.”

Considering herself moderately active, a fellow student shared her reflections on diversity. “Realizing the diversity in which we live, not only in aspects of cultures and race, but ideals and interests and everything [is really important].” Having established strong bonds with non-Muslims with similar interests in her co-curricular activities she said, “Friendships I’ve built with people in the outdoors – that builds a bond when you go through
a struggle together. It builds a strong bond and I don’t under-mind that.” With a true sense of belonging, another participant actively engages in service-learning opportunities. “I’m leading an alternative spring break trip next semester and also teaching a class about it,” she said excitedly. Combining her care for others and her ethnic background, she is also a co-founder of a Bangladeshi humanitarian awareness organization.

For one participant in particular, involvement in student activities, exposure to a wide variety of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, and a peer support system during college greatly influenced her development. A senior, she has embraced all her institution has to offer. Involvement in student groups, volunteer and study abroad opportunities, as well as internships have helped broaden her worldview. Discussing workshops and other campus events she said, “They are things I would never have learned in classes. I feel sometimes there are things and issues that professors don’t have time to address or don’t feel is appropriate.” Interested in learning more, she stressed the value of student organizations. “They’ll bring a speaker or hold cultural events [and] you learn so much.” Wanting the most out of her college experience, she shared, “I want to do interesting things. I want to travel. I want to meet new people.”

Recognizing that campus activities definitely helped her make friends, she expanded her involvement to include several different interfaith organizations. Finding Catholic affiliated volunteer trips very rewarding she shared, “I could be involved with other religious groups and not feel that I have to be a part of that religion. So, it’s makes you feel this world is more about unifying towards good will, work, and service.” She also had the opportunity
to go to Jordan and learn more about cultures and differences in communication styles outside of America.

I met men who were open about their view of Muslim women. [When it comes to] the problems in the Middle East, men will tell you clearly what they think. Which I think is a good thing because then you know what to work on. Men here, you don’t even know what they think of you or they think what your role should be as a woman or where you stand. So, in a way I actually find it better to go to the Middle East because at least I know what I can debate on. And they will debate with you, which is amazing.

During her time in Jordan, this participant had the opportunity to work for a women’s non-government organization and subsequently learned more about her own gender.

I met women who are in the parliament in Jordan, and women who are writers, who are authors and they came and spoke to us and it was amazing because you hear this problem but you see so many women actually out there doing things. But, these women are like extraordinary. [They] decided to defy their traditionalist people. So meeting them gave me so much courage.

Reflecting on her trip to Jordan, this participant said, “It was a positive defining moment of being a women and what it means to struggle for your rights.” Empowered by these experiences, she feels if the women of Jordan are out there making a difference in such a restricted community, then she too should be able to make a difference in America’s more liberal society.
Relationships with peers.

During college, participants are also developing new relationships and reconfiguring existing friendships to maintain their need for support and connection. The college years shape the way they think and act. All participants indicated engagement with peers is a large part of that process. “I’d say relationships are very important. One of the most important,” said one participant. Discussing her relationships with peers, another student stated, “They certainly define me a lot.” Likewise, a fellow study member indicated, “I think friends are a big part of your identity, especially in a place like college.” Reflecting on her friendships another undergraduate revealed, “I guess relationships with people define me based on good people in my life and being able to judge what I want and what they want and whether or not that’s a comparable match.”

Discussing the compatibility of personal values with those of her friends, one study member said, “Relationships have been really important in that sense because you’re around people all the time so they are going to have an influence on you. You have to decide what you want that influence to be.” Another participant recognized the influences of others have the potential to be both positive and negative. “If they’re good people then I’ll hang out with them. As long as I’m doing things that I’m supposed to that does not mean that I can’t be friends with these people.”

“Because I’m in a college environment, [I have to deal with] things like no drinking, restrictions on dating and relations with the opposite gender,” shared one participant. Discussing her understanding of having religious beliefs and guidelines that forbid such
traditional college social activities she added, “I’m kind of separated but I know what I’m doing and I don’t judge people. If people do these things, I don’t judge them. I just don’t choose that for myself.” Trusting her own behaviors will reflect her personal values, another participant realized, “I’m going to have friends that do a lot of things I don’t agree with. We might not completely agree on everything – it might be really different – but we both get something really important out of that.” Being open-minded and eager to expand her own

*Figure 4. Self-Pictorial Representation of ‘Who am I?’ Depicting Relationships with Peers. The image was created using a black marker on a sheet of 8.5” x 11” white paper. “My close relationships are really important to me,” she shared. Describing the images features in her drawing she continued, “It’s a picture of my friends and family. A book because I value education. I am standing on something with wheels because I like mobility in general - finding different kinds of ways to solve problems and things.” Describing the social context of her image she explains, “The biggest thing that makes me feel a part of a community is how accepting they are to a diversity of opinions.” She added, “I don’t want all my friends to have to same opinion as me. I also don’t want someone to look down on me just because I don’t agree with them.”*
worldview, she stressed how engagement with diverse others and communication of varied perspectives is vital to celebrating differences and building relationships (see Figure 4).

As religion became more important to a fellow study participant, she started re-evaluating her friendships.

Maybe my interests are a little bit different but at the same time, these are people that I really care about because they can really make me a better person. How do I fit those together where I’m not compromising anything that I believe in, but at the same time, I’m not imposing anything on them?

Nevertheless, college presents many challenges to the religious identity of participants. All seven participants commented on how shared values and behavior guidelines make college life more comfortable. “It’s probably easiest to be really good friends with other Muslims as opposed to non-Muslims because we share a lot of common experiences. There’s a lot of things that come easier because we know what’s expected from one another,” shared one participant. Similarly, a fellow study member said, “I think the main thing is just the values. There are behavior guidelines that are understood.” For another student, increased interest in her religion during college illuminated the value of having Muslim friends. “I noticed that the relationships with whom I can practice my religion became closer just because we would pray in group and hang out after that. So, then they just started getting closer and closer.” Feeling more like herself around other Muslim girls a fellow undergraduate said, “The similarities and the experiences you have with Muslim girls is very strong, it’s almost a culture of it’s own.” The kindred spirit of people who are Muslim
provides a level of unsurpassed comfort for another participant. “I like to question things and I like to think there’s an open arena for questions in our Islamic community.”

While sharing religion is important to most participants, one student also gravitates toward others who share her ethnicity. “I would say that a lot of my closest friends are Bangladeshi.” Having a best friend who shares her ethnicity and religion, another student added, “It is very easy for me to relate to her because we’re the same age, so we have the same experiences going on at the same time.” A fellow study member revealed the reality of finding true friends. “I have a few very good friends but it’s a rare thing to have a good friend. I have a lot of acquaintances.” Sadly, another participant confided, “I don’t have any friends that I would talk to about personal matters.”

**Experiences with feelings of otherness.**

During adolescence and throughout college participants ventured out of their comfort zones to connect with people of diverse backgrounds. Often times, participants were forced into awareness of being different. While they recognize the distinctiveness of their religious beliefs, they did not welcome the sense of being strange or separated from others. At other times, they welcomed the opportunity to understand their own sense of otherness and worked toward finding comfort with who they are.

All seven participants are constantly challenged by the traditional mainstream collegiate activities that completely contradict their religious beliefs and values. One participant shared, “I know people who go to parties and don’t drink or dance or anything. I definitely feel more comfortable around people who don’t necessarily value those kinds of
activities or certain ways of thinking.” Often upset by her non-Muslim roommate’s failure to understand, she continued, “She knows that I would never do it, but she always asks anyway. We’re not particularly close. We don’t really hang out. She doesn’t really understand why I choose not to do it or else she wouldn’t always ask me.”

Another study member shared similar concerns about relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. “I feel in a lot of ways we’ll never be that close because there’s just
always going to be this barrier.” Further elaborating on social barriers, a 19 year-old Pakistani shared her feelings on religious differences (see Figure 5).

Even though one participant shares the same ethnicity with other students, she faces many conflicts as a result of her religious beliefs.

The problem is they don’t identify with the Islamic part of it very well and so it’s kind of hard because they do a lot of things that are against my beliefs and there’s this awkwardness between us. The different experiences they have clash with mine and we don’t know how to relate sometimes.

When it comes to ethnic and cultural differences, many of the other participants also struggle with finding comfort. One participant said, “I’m Bangladeshi and I’ve hung out with Indian people who are very similar in region and culture but I felt very out of place and they weren’t as welcoming to me.” A native of Bosnia, another student commented on conflicts between her place in Bosnian society and American society.

I feel like I don’t fit in anywhere because I’m clearly American in my way of life. I speak the language better than Bosnian. And I’m comfortable here. When people find out I’m Muslim, they have to have a reason why. I say I’m Bosnian and then all of a sudden I don’t fit into that American girl or American woman genre.

Likewise, another study member stated, “I personally feel more American than I do Pakistani. I was born and raised here. When I go to Pakistan, I feel like an outsider. Here it’s not that much different.” Although another student’s family heritage stems from South Asia, she doesn’t feel connected to others from the same area.
I really like identifying myself as Pakistani but I don’t like when it divides me from other people and I feel that happens a lot. The second half of freshman year I started going to a lot of things for the Indian Student Association or the South Asian Student Association. I’m South Asian since I’m from Pakistan, but most of those people are from India. Our ancestors came from Afghanistan to India so [I’m] not really Indian because [I’m] Afghani and [I] don’t look like the other Indian people. So that makes you think I’m like them, but I’m not like them. I’m Pakistani and they’re Indian. But, just to see how ethnicity does really effect who you’re comfortable around – A lot of my friends are Arab too and then you can see how sometimes me and my South Asian friends would feel more comfortable together where the Arab friends would feel more comfortable together.

Finding comfort with herself, one participant stated, “I’ve come to terms with the fact that everybody will not always like you. I think that’s a big thing and once you get that then you’re comfortable.” Believing that others are often intimidated because she wears the headscarf, another student said, “I adopted the idea of being more open. Being able to carry on a conversation with anyone despite where they’re coming from. I’ll try to always take that opportunity to talk to someone.” Having opportunities to meet different people, one member shared, “I’m more comfortable being open about differences and having constructive conversations whereas before I wasn’t really sure what I was supposed to believe in or how to reconcile what the mainstream was telling me versus what I thought was right.”
Reflecting on her campus friendships, another participant said, “I don’t like to stick to one group of friends from one race or ethnicity or anything like that. I have a very diverse group of friends. I learn something new from each of them.” Also placing value on diversity, a fellow student indicated, “It’s important to know people of different faiths and it’s very important to get along with other people.” Similarly, another participant shared, “Non-Muslims make you realize there’s another world out there. By interacting with them in college they teach you how to be with other people. So, I try to keep a lot of non-Muslim friends.” Another undergraduate also commented on the importance of multiple points of view within the greater student body. “I think you learn to appreciate that here because not everybody thinks the way you do and in order for you to express yourself you need to give other people the opportunity to do the same thing.”

One participant discussed how she approaches situations where understanding and valuing differences is paramount. “Well first of all I have to be accepting. I do ask questions, but I try to always stay very respectful of their identity and what they feel. I don’t want to hurt their feelings.” Mindful of others and wanting to treat them the way she herself would like to be treated, she continued,

I think my beliefs and faith and identity are very important to me, but another person’s faith, religion and all that, might be very important to them. I know that I wouldn’t feel very happy if they weren’t accepting of me. So, I should be accepting of them.
When conflicts do arise, she focuses on shared interests, unless the point of contention is much too emotionally charged.

If they are very different from me and it’s something we can just put aside and concentrate on our similarities – than just do that. If it’s something that’s fixable then we attempt to do that. Compromise is very important. But if it’s to the point where its attacking, I would just avoid it and walk away.

Likewise, another participant expressed that she would walk away if the situation became too uncomfortable. “If I don’t feel comfortable in certain situations then I’ll just remove myself from it.” Understanding her faith forbids her to engage in certain activities, another student does not understand why others are not accepting of these differences. “You always feel a little bit taken aback.” Trying not to become judgmental herself, she has recently implemented a new personal strategy to deal with difference. “You can never judge and you can never impose. Let’s talk this out and then if it ends up that we agree to disagree then that’s cool. Better that, than walking around with this tension.” She has since had the realization that disagreements will always exist.

Just as there are many things that I don’t agree with, there’s just as many people who don’t agree with what I think. So, if I’m given the opportunity to believe what I want and to say what I want, then it should be the same vice versa. Part of that is the freedom of the place that we live in, that you can express that.

Everyone struggles with finding a comfortable equilibrium of values and beliefs. “These morals are what’s causing all this stress. That definitely builds a barrier. If this is
their way of thinking, how much can I actually trust them,” said a fellow study participant. College has opened her eyes to these differences and the struggles of building relationships. “I lose friends that I realized we don’t see eye-to-eye anymore and gain friends that I realized have the same values as mine and realized that friendships have to be based on these values and have to be based on character or they’re not going to last.” While the participants face many situations with conflicting ideas and lifestyles, one student indicated, “There’s never been a point where I’ve had to compromise my religion unless it was my own choice.”

Likewise, another study member said, “In a college environment you have to take everything into consideration. There are a lot of different ideas here. You have a lot of female role models here. It gives you incentive to be more empowered.” Reflecting on how greatly the whole college experience has influenced her she added, “I have seen the difference I think for myself. I’m finally able to be more accepting of different female ideas that I wasn’t necessarily accepting of before. Female empowerment just takes a different meaning.” Similarly, another participant welcomes the opportunity to learn and discover new things about herself when introduced to new ideas. “When people have different ideas or bring new things to the plate, it’s interesting to hear that and it really does make you grow. You look back and you realize some of these things don’t matter as much.” Another study volunteer recalled feeling empowered being away from home for the first time when she started college. “When you get here, you’re on your own. It was the first time I was living away from home. So it gave me a chance to develop myself without my parents or my family
being around.” With a better awareness of her identity she exclaimed, “Being comfortable with who you are leads to confidence.”

Coming to America at the age of eight, another participant discussed the value of being open-minded and flexible. “You should always be able to relate to people and sometimes my beliefs on political issues might change from person to person because I can see where they’re coming from.” Understanding friendships help you learn about yourself, another student said, “We’re part of this community and everyone has something about them that you can appreciate and something that you can learn from.”

Yet, for one passionate participant the decision to wear the hijab often results in feelings of loneliness and isolation. “I have been confronted but it’s always been with ignorance and I think that if people really knew about the religion they wouldn’t be quite as intimidated by it.” Often met with questions about the significance and limitations of the headscarf, she expressed, “Those are rote questions that I would get almost every single day.” Proud to wear the hijab, she added,

I don’t necessarily think that’s necessarily a bad thing because people should know that I’m Muslim and I abide by a different code. Sometimes when they take that in a negative way and the hijab has negative connotations – obviously that becomes a problem for me.

Curiosity is one thing, but antagonism is another. When people point at the hijab, she feels “they’re pointing at my religion. They might be curious about the hijab but [if they are] antagonistic against what it represents and what I represent it becomes a touchy point.”
When others are more malicious than curious, she feels quite alone. “It just brings back all the memories of always feeling foreign and all those different times when people have just declared you’re from this really foreign country.” Moreover, people often suggest that wearing the headscarf was not a free choice. “I have to constantly say that I did this on my own. My family was against it and I still had to convince them I wanted to do it.” Always fighting for her right to express her Muslim identity in whatever way she deems necessary, she concluded, “I don’t know why people [are] constantly getting into this debate because [the hijab] seems so insignificant compared to other things that we need to do for faith.”

**Summary of Identity is Fluid and Dynamic**

Managing internal and external perceptions, the female Muslim students in this study socially constructed their attitudes, expectations and behaviors based upon their understanding of cultural and contextual interpretations. What identities they brought to campus were later influenced by the higher education exposure to new people and ideas. Faced with extraordinary cultural and religious tensions with the non-Muslim world, participants struggled to find their place on the college campus. As a result of their socialization into the larger campus community, the majority of participants indicated reality is an ongoing, dynamic process based upon their interpretations of interactions in various social contexts and the resulting choices they made. Clearly, development for the participants of this study occurs as a result of interaction with the environment.
Identity is Multifaceted

The findings from this research highlight the many complexities of identity development. The participants’ identities are composed of multiple, overlapping aspects of self and the multifaceted nature of identity greatly influences their development. Their comments indicate that different aspects of self become more salient through varying degrees of awareness garnered through their lived experiences and various contextual influences. Thus, multiple aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, gender and religion, become internally defined as participants develop personal meaning and ownership of who they are and how they present themselves to the world around them.

Multiple Dimensions of Identity

The participants are clearly members of more than one social group and have multiple aspects of self. Their responses provide insight into what makes certain social identities more salient than other ones. Given different contextual and temporal elements, such as those found in their college experience, identity salience is variable. Therefore, in order to understand the participants’ identity development, all of their social identities must be considered. This research specifically focuses on the participants’ ethnic, gender and religious identities.

Ethnicity.

Each participant’s ethnic group has its own values, beliefs and ways of living. Some of the study’s participants have formed a positive sense of ethnic identity and confidence in their own reference group. Their ethnic identity allows them to cope with a wide variety of
life situations. For other participants, ethnicity is not a salient aspect of their self-
identification. Faced with ideas and images beyond their control, these students form value
judgments and have their own perspectives about the role ethnicity plays in their worldview,
and most immediately as college undergraduates.

After reflecting on actual impressions as opposed to preferred influences, one
participant said, “Being South Asian and Bangladeshi, I feel it’s an important part of my
identity and how I grew up but I don’t really want traditional and cultural values to
necessarily limit the way I’m allowed to live or express myself.” Another interviewee said,
“Ethnicity plays a huge role in my life.” A fellow study member commented, “I realize how
important ethnicity is to your character, to your personality.” Recognizing the social reality
of living in America and its influence on her ethnic identity a study participant stated, “I’m
raised in America where you have every race and I interact with people of every race. So,
it’s becoming less of a factor.” Similarly, a fellow study member said, “On a scale of one to
ten, it’s really not that important to me.” However, understanding her ethnicity has shaped
her, she added, “Pakistan has a really rich culture. Culture is just this fun way of setting
yourself a part.”

One way culture sets people apart from one another is through shared linguistics.
One participant revealed, “I think culture is important to a certain extent, especially
language.” Another study contributor explained, “My mom has made an effort to teach all of
her children Urdu (one of the two official languages of Pakistan), so we speak it, at least at a
moderate level of confidence. So basically, I kept it alive that way.” Another one of the
study’s young academics indicated being around people from similar cultures, using similar language is comforting.

Being around [Bengalis] really helps me. When we’re together we always talk about going to Bangladesh. We say random words or start talking in Bengali. It’s really awesome because when I’m home I always speak Bengali. So, being with them helps me remember how awesome it really is.

**Gender.**

The participant’s gender identity development is a complex, unique process with many pathways heading to different identity destinations. Finding more comfort with their gender identity in private, the participants revealed they sometimes feel challenged by being a woman in public. They indicated that their gender identity is often influenced by societal expectations. For most of the participants, they equate their gender identity with gender roles. Nevertheless, while they see differences between men and women, the majority of the participants do not feel being a woman limits them in any way.

“I don’t think [being a woman] stops me from doing anything,” said one participant. “I feel women are just as strong and independent as men [and] just as capable to do anything.” In regards to being a woman, another student said, “It’s not really something that I consciously think about just because it’s the way I was born.” Believing being a woman is more about how she is viewed in society, she added, “I’m sure there are a lot of influences that I don’t even realize as far as society’s pressure on girls. But, I can’t think of anything really specific other than the way I dress.” Elaborating on her Multiple Dimensions of
Identity worksheet (see Figure 6) she shared, “Being Muslim is really important to me because it’s my religion, but the fact that I’m a female and heterosexual – it’s just like everyday gender roles – the way I’m viewed in society.”

“...”

“A lot of how you are perceived by a person deals with your gender and your looks. People have this perception, before even getting to know you, of how you should act,” shared
another interviewee. Adhering to her own definition of womanhood, which includes strength, modesty, and self-respect, she realized the importance of taking ownership of being female. “I have to make sure I have the same rights as males. But, I don’t think that male and female are exactly the same. Equal but different. That’s the idea.”

Believing there are pros and cons for both genders a fellow participant disagrees with feminist ideologies. “I feel sometimes they go a little bit overboard. I feel now we’re getting to a spot where it’s equal balance of human rights. And, if we’re not there, then we’re getting there.” Conversely, another student felt while being a woman is distinctly different from being a man, that doesn’t mean they are unequal. “It just means we have different ways of thinking, different ways of doing things.” Yet, bothered that being a woman is the first thing people notice about her, she added,

At the same time each person is distinct. I don’t like to categorize women as a whole because within that every single person is completely different. For me, I’m one woman but I’m distinctly different from every other woman. So, it’s not so much that I’m a woman, but that I am myself.

As the only child, one participant’s parents raised her to be very independent. Discussing gender she said, “It influences the decisions I make or the decisions I’m not going to make just because I am a woman.” But, also realizing the contradictions between the genders, she added, “It means you have to struggle a lot more to be able to do things that you always thought you’d be able to do.” Another study member shared, “Gender definitely
plays a big part in how I see myself. [It] really shapes your personality. As a female I think I have definitely had to deal with a lot more than a lot of males.”

**Religion.**

The participants’ development of religious identity is similar to their other patterns of identity development. As the data indicates, during adolescence, they were confronted with challenges to how they think about themselves. During this time, they developed the capacity to see and accept multiple points of view, which permitted the exploration of spiritual and religious beliefs. For the participants of this study, religious identity is the essence of everything they are and stand for. Believing her Muslim identity doesn’t keep her back from anything, one participant shared, “I accepted Islam for myself. I’m pretty well adjusted to this culture. Muslims belong here. I belong here as a Muslim female. I felt very comfortable my entire life.” Another student stressed, “I want people to see me and know that I am Muslim.” Sharing the same sentiment, a fellow study participant shared, “I’ve always been relatively religious. I care a lot about my religion.”

One student contributor commented, “You have to want to apply Islam to your life.” Choosing to wear the hijab to reflect her connection to Islam, she added, “It is important for me to take on the responsibility and realize I’m a Muslim woman.” Another participant echoed, “I’ve embraced it. I feel very connected to Islam. It all makes sense to me. Everything makes a lot of sense and I have a lot of faith in it and it helps you realize your own insignificance.” Spending time in reflection, a fellow student shared, “I look at
everything less based on rituals and the outside appearance and more on how you’re reflecting on the guidelines and standards that are placed on Muslims.”

Finally, another member of the study said, “I think it was necessary to realize where I’m coming from and why I do the things that I do. And what my religion really means in my life.” Describing her understanding of the development of religious identity, she

Figure 7. Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheet Depicting Religious Identity.
expressed that each individual has the potential to redefine the core of their religion for themselves (see Figure 7). “Learning about your religion. Learning about other religions…it makes me more confident and steadfast in my religion.”

**The Intersection of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

While each of the participants understands the individual aspects of their identity, the findings from this study shows one social label is inefficient in describing female Muslim undergraduates. Frequently seeing relationships between and among multiple dimensions of their identity, the participants revealed that ethnicity, gender and religion are interwoven into the fabric of their identity so tightly they cannot separate those aspects of self.

“I’m Bangladeshi, I’m Muslim,” said one participant. Born outside of the United States she stressed how much emphasis her parents placed on culture and religion going hand-in-hand. Describing how she plotted her ethnic and religious identities on the Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet (see Figure 8) she explained, “They play an everyday role in my life. I constantly use my ethnicity and my religion in making decisions. So I put those as very close to me.”

Agreeing some aspects of identity are inseparable another student added, “I feel identifying myself as Bangladeshi kind of limited the way I grew up and so I try to avoid just looking at myself solely on being Bangladeshi.” A fellow study member said, “I am Muslim, I am Pakistani, I am a female.” Speaking of how religion, ethnicity and gender are intertwined, another one of the study’s young learners shared, “I guess those are the three things that describe me the most. I mean there is obviously a hierarchy of what I believe in
and what I identify with.” Similarly, another participant said, “I’m Muslim even though I
don’t know if people can tell right away. After that I’d say I’m Bosnian. And thirdly I’m a

woman, which is probably the only one people can actually identify me as.” Acutely aware
of the role personal identification plays in her life she further elaborated,

Figure 8. Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheet Depicting the Intersection of Ethnicity
and Religion.
My religion, Islam, it’s what defines me the most. Being a female and independent are very strong things that I don’t want to lose, as well as my Bosnian culture because it defined the paths that I underwent in my life and it defines the choices that I made. She continued to explain her comfort level with the intersection of her gender and religion, “Being a woman and being a Muslim, I feel how you take that knowledge and use it in a positive way in this world while still maintaining your core beliefs and being a good Muslim is something that I’m very proud of.”

In describing what it means to be a Muslim woman, a participant who wears the headscarf said, “Being a woman, things are related to being a Muslim. The way I dress is related to my being Muslim. [The way] I interact with people is related to my being Muslim. It all links to that.” Explaining her Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet (see Figure 9) she said, “Islam is pretty obvious but I put female because being a woman is what people notice and choose to talk about a lot.” Upon further reflection she added, “Wearing hijab has been a fairly distinguishing factor for me. It is important for me to take on the responsibility and realize that I’m a Muslim woman.”

When another participant was asked to describe what it means to be a woman, she instantly responded, “Just a woman or a Muslim woman?” Wearing the hijab, she feels being Muslim and being female are inseparable. “I don’t know if you can separate the two. I mean Muslim women are always in the spotlight because of the scarf especially, or their clothes in general. People pay more attention to our styles of clothing.” Another student also clearly had difficulty distinguishing her gender and religious identities independently.
“Female is so defined by Islam that it’s hard to disconnect the two. I feel they’re so interlocked that you have Islam and then you have how you should be a Muslim girl.” Also recognizing this intersection of identities, a fellow study member stated, “I see myself as a Muslim and then I see myself as a woman and I see how that shapes who I am.” Likewise,

*Figure 9. Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheet Depicting the Intersection of Gender and Religion.*
another undergraduate shared, “Being Muslim helps me find my gender identity and define it more. You really learn more about yourself as a woman and what it means to be a woman.”

Several participants discussed the intersection of their faith and ethnicity. “I definitely think that [my religion and ethnicity] influence the way I dress,” shared a participant who dresses modestly but does not wear the headscarf. When discussing the intersection of religion with ethnicity another study volunteer revealed, “Culture and religion have always been influential upon each other.” Recognizing the source of her beliefs and values she added, “My parents would always emphasize the fact that we’re not only Muslim but we’re also Bangladeshi, which gave us a whole different kind of value system.” Finally, another study member simply stated, “I think Muslim and Pakistani do a good job of explaining what kind of a person I am.”

Creating Synergy between Self Perceptions and Social Perceptions

The participants’ identity is shaped by both internal meanings and external messages. Through social interactions, they actively participate in the creation of their perceived social reality and aim towards mutually shared meanings. During identity negotiations, the participants try to blend personal characteristics and interests within socially pre-defined identities. With strong conviction, each participant in the study stressed their belief that ethnicity, gender, and religion all play an influential role in defining the choices they make. They indicated reality is an evolving social process based upon their interpretations of interactions with others and their environment. Managing how one views themselves and
how others view them, the participants continuously work toward creating synergy among their multiple aspects of self and building and maintaining healthy relationships with others.

One participant explained her understanding of identity. “I feel your identity explains where you are as a person and what kind of beliefs you have.” Coming from war torn Bosnia, a study contributor reflected, “You think about the way you’ve been shaped [and you realize] you don’t have to match everybody else.” She recognized how influential her American life experiences have been on her self-perceptions. “Being here with so many people, you’re forced to think about who you are and where you stand and whether or not you want to change that for somebody else just to have friends.”

Another participant defined character in respect to her interpretation of Islam. Her understanding of faith is much more important than how society defines character. “I want people to see me as a Muslim and with that the Muslim characteristics of female – very strong and very modest. I want people to respect me and I strive to bring out that demeanor.” She shared how difficult it has been as a Muslim woman to remain respectful to self while gaining respect from others. “Throughout the years trying to develop that and show that has been difficult because people are usually intimidated by that kind of demeanor. They only respect it over time.”

Agreeing she cannot control what others will think about her, another interviewee revealed, “I look at myself first and take care of myself. People will come to different conclusions at different times.” While moving along her developmental path as an undergraduate and dealing with fellow students’ perceptions of her, she admitted,
I know a lot of what I want and what I aspire to be, but putting that to action is always the harder part because if people are used to you being a certain way, than changing that is always really hard.

While another student also struggled with acceptance, she expressed how differences of opinion do not usually discourage her. “It doesn’t faze me. Some of them really respect [me] and sometimes I feel like I’m being judged.” Similarly, one member of the study volunteered, “I feel I have a strong sense of self. I know what I am and I feel it shows.” Understanding differences between assumed and actual impressions, she added, “People may see things that I don’t see in myself [and] I might see things in myself that people don’t see [in me].” Learning early on that making and keeping friends meant remaining true to yourself, she came to college confident in herself. “I had to be me and they could either accept it or leave it. And, I made a lot of friends.”

**Summary of Identity is Multifaceted**

The research data suggest female Muslim undergraduates see their identity as constructed of multiple, interconnected elements. Each participant identified religion as intertwined with either ethnicity or gender individually or simultaneously. Unable to separate these social identities, the participants discovered ethnicity, gender and religion often reinforce and complement one another. This understanding affects their lives during college. Creating feelings of attachment to others during college shapes the way the participants think and act on campus and later in life. For the present time on campus, believing others do not understand the complex nature of their identity, participants found it
nearly impossible to manage only one social identity at a time when dealing with conflicts. As a result of these conflicts, participants continually re-evaluate who they are and how they fit into the world around them.

**Identity is Understood through a Religious Interpretative Lens**

The female Muslim undergraduates in this study use a religious interpretative lens to understand their social interactions and environment. A religious core identity supersedes all other aspects of identity for this subpopulation of students. Religious identity salience, which intersects with ethnic and gender identities, is reflected in the participants’ social and cultural role-defined realities. The participants articulated that using a religious interpretative lens to make meaning of personal interactions and life experiences is essential to developing, maintaining, and negotiating the multiple aspects of their identity. They actively choose to practice their faith in a more open manner and reach out to non-Muslims to foster a greater understanding of Islam and other Muslims to encourage acceptance of differing perspectives.

**Religion is Core Identity**

For the participants of this study, the Islamic religion is their most salient and at the core of their identity. The basis for their values and relationships, their religious identity guides the way they communicate and present their identity to others. Throughout the interviews, all seven participants consistently articulated a relationship between their religion and their perceptions of self. One participant simply stated, “I see myself first and foremost as a Muslim.” A fellow study member who wears the headscarf shared, “Religion is obviously important. I think it’s always been religion over everything else; over my identity
as an American or my identity as a Pakistani.” In reviewing her Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet (see Figure 10), it is very apparent religion is her most salient identity as her interests reside close to the core while her other social identities reside on the outer edges of the intersecting circles.

*Figure 10. Self-Pictorial Representation of ‘Who am I?’ Depicting Religion as Core Identity.*
In discussing the multiple aspects of identity, another undergraduate recognized her religion as the most important socially identifying characteristic of herself. While this participant does not wear the hijab, she does enjoy the sense of otherness that comes with being Muslim and adhering to an Islamic lifestyle.

I think it’s my primary way of identification. I think it’s what sets me apart the most from the majority of people who I see on a daily basis. So yeah, I think it probably plays more to my identity than anything else.

Gaining understanding and clarity about themselves and their place in the world, the participants acknowledged the significance of accepting Islam for themselves. While raised with Islamic principles and practices, the participants did not simply assume their religious beliefs from their parents’ teachings but rather took opportunities to explore and discover what their religion means to them. One participant volunteered, “My parents would always say as I grew older [I would] start looking at religion on my own terms.” With full conviction and strong belief, she admitted that her exposure to similar and dissimilar peers during college really allowed her to examine her religion and define the role in which Islam would play in her life. Also finding Islamic practices and traditions important in her daily life, another undergraduate explained, “I accepted Islam for myself. I had to look into myself. I had to question. I had to go through that entire process. It’s not something that you just blindly accept.” Recognizing that all of her accumulated social interactions and personal experiences have shaped who she is today, she expressed how invested and
confident she has become in her religion when completing the Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet (see Figure 11).

Similarly, during high school, a fellow study member made a conscious decision to accept Islam for herself. Using critical thinking and reasoning to assess her emotional and cognitive processes regarding her religion she shared that she made a declaration of her faith

*Figure 11. Self-Pictorial Representation of ‘Who am I?’ Depicting Religion as Core Identity.*
with full conviction. “I was 15 or 16 years old, I wanted to accept mainly because everything made sense to me. There wasn’t anything I was being told or I’d learned that I didn’t understand, that I didn’t quite disagree with.”

**Religion as Meaning-Making Filter**

Many of the participants agree Islam is much more than just a set of beliefs and practices. “Islam is a way of life. It’s there to help you make the best decisions so you can live your life in a very well rounded way,” shared one student. Realizing how integral religion is to her identity, a fellow participant revealed, “Every action I take is a result of my religion because I think that should be the center and everything else should be molded around it.” Agreeing, another interviewee spoke very passionately about her faith.

“Everything that I do in my life has to ultimately go back to my religion. It helps me stay focused on what I want, on what I’m doing. I feel it gives me purpose for everything.” Another participant shared a similar comment, “Everything I do is based on Islam and whether I can or cannot do [something]. It definitely encompasses my life.” Likewise, a fellow study member stressed, “At the core, everything I do should be with an act of worship.” With her Muslim identity at the root of her thoughts and behaviors another student explained her increased interest in her religion.

I’m very into my religion. Especially right now. I see it as the way I live my life. How I make my decisions. I’m constantly trying to keep myself in check and remembering why I’m doing this, which is not something that I was doing a few months ago.
Seeing religion as her primary way of identification, a fellow participant explained,

“Being Muslim is really important to me because it’s my religion, my value system – without that I think I’d be a totally different person and have a really different frame of thinking.”

*Figure 12. Self-Pictorial Representation of ‘Who am I?’ Depicting Religion as Meaning-Making Filter. The image was created using full color markers on a sheet of 8.5” x 11” white paper. “It’s basically me standing on hills looking at the world. I want to see the world. It’s so scary sometimes, but it’s so eye-opening. It’s a really big thing to me. I was surprised that I just started drawing light. I love light. I feel like that’s how you see the world. In the Qur’an they say God is light of the heavens and the world. It’s light upon light and it’s always used in every single part of the Qur’an. God is light. That’s a shahda and that’s how you proclaim your faith [explaining Arabic text in drawing]. ‘There’s no God but God and Mohammed is the messenger.’ I should have put it on the top. That’s what I have to think of at all times. That everything I do should be for God. Every picture I take should be so other people see and remember God. It should always be about that final goal of pleasing God.”*
Several participants described the need to acquire additional information in order to make informed decisions. One student said, “You have to think about it and that’s the whole test.” She explained her impromptu drawing revealing the importance of her religious identity in helping her make meaning of her experiences (see Figure 12). Likewise, another participant declared, “I learned about the religion. Because I feel you can’t really identify as a religion until you learn about it and know about it.”

The summer before college, another participant made the definitive decision to uphold Islamic principles and continually work to increase her understanding of her religion. Before college, I started wearing hijab. That was a distinguishing factor for me because I wasn’t just a girl, but I was a Muslim woman. When I started wearing the hijab it was very apparent that I’m taking on that role. I’m not a little kid anymore. It is important for me to take on the responsibility and realize I’m a Muslim woman. You have to want to apply Islam to your life. How do you apply what you read in the Qur’an to your daily life? I have an idea of what I think that means for me – being active, being a leader, being involved, being really passionate about your religion. A desire to want to learn more. To want to study or just be around people and talk about Islam. That’s something important for me. I think you find it through your experience of being informed.

Also, exposure to other religions has solidified several participants’ commitment to Islam. “Learning about other religions, I felt stronger about my own,” shared one participant.

Wanting to learn more about herself while still respecting differences, a fellow student stated,
“I feel learning about things that I’m not, made me find a better sense of myself. I think it’s a really wonderful experience.”

Being introduced to new people and ideas during college has been an opportunity for growth for several study participants. “Especially in college, you evaluate your religion completely different because you see a lot more different people and you question religion in different ways,” shared one participant. Recognizing the way her parents practice their religion is culturally linked and sometimes disagreeing with their interpretation of Islam, another student realized personal growth was her responsibility during college.

I think that’s the atmosphere of college, you begin to pursue things on your own and you find something you’re interested in and run with it. So, I think that’s been different. The desire to increase my knowledge about Islam. When there’s something that I disagree with, maybe practices that are more cultural than religious that I feel are restricting the way I’m allowed to live or express myself, that’s when I start questioning “Is this actually the religion? Or, is this part of some social norm that people just follow?”

Faced with many restrictions on drinking, dancing and other typical college student activities, Muslim students must consider how they will respond to such social pressures. One study member indicated she preferred being around others who share the same values. “I think when you’re faced with struggles like that every day you have to really think about why you are doing this and are you doing it for the right reasons. It really reinforces what you believe in.” Reflecting on her college experiences, another participant shared, “I still hold fast to the
Qur’an and the ways of the Prophet. Seeing things that stray from that [has] pushed me closer to that rather than the other way.”

Realizing different people place varying meanings on their faith, one participant shared her thoughts about the process she underwent to understand her religious identity. “I think it’s taking your religion and interpreting it in a way to fit your needs and your beliefs. It’s important to have it because it helps you have faith in something.” Moving to the United States when she was eight years old, another student remembered those that died for her right to practice her religion.

When I came to the U.S., my family members died for me to have the right to practice my religion. Like 280,000 Muslims died so I can practice my religion and have the right to be a Muslim. How can I ignore that opportunity? How can I say they died in vain?

When asked her definition of what it means to be Muslim, another interviewee stated, “From the beginning it’s always meant submission. It’s submitting to God and submission in your entire way of living.” After further reflection about how essential faith and spirituality are to being Muslim she added,

What I think about the most is probably kindness. I think this is becoming more clear to me in faith. A lot of people are losing the faith and focusing on the rote everyday things that are classified as being Muslim. It’s always about more visual things like prayer in public and then in private it’s not being upheld.
Similarly, another member believes there are other important aspects of her religion. “I think there are a lot of different components of being a Muslim. The personal, introspective level is the most important, but then there’s also the community level and the family level. Even the physical level.” Expounding upon these thoughts she shared, “Learning more about your faith and the people around you are probably the most important to me.” A fellow undergraduate understood her Islamic faith, like most other faiths, is something that must continually evolve to meet the needs of its followers. “Sometimes it doesn’t fit in perfectly and it’s not a nice little package that’s perfect and for all times. You have to work on the religion to make it applicable to all times and that’s something that [I’m] working on.”

**Religious traditions and practices.**

All seven women interviewed identified themselves as raised with Islamic traditions and practices. While the intensity of parental influence varied from one participant to the next, these women continue to embrace religious practices as strong elements in their lives. For example, one participant said, “I feel that prayer keeps you on track. A lot of people are like why are you praying? But it reminds you five times a day why you’re here. So, I’d say that’s very important.” Expressing her commitment to prayer, another student shared the increased awareness she has experienced through her daily practice.

When you realize that God does all these things for you and how little does he ask of us to recognize he gave you all of this and just to worship him. Five times a day seems like a lot to people, but it’s not. And the thing is, I find that all these things that God wants us to do are so beneficial for us. You go praying and you have this
sort of meditation. And it’s at the perfect times of the day when you start getting stressed out. So, the praying is supposed to be for God but you see the miracle and how it’s beneficial for you.

Taking her religion and relationship with God very seriously, she continued to reflect on the strength and personal benefits she receives from practicing her religion when discussing her self-pictorial representation (see Figure 13).

![Figure 13. Self-Pictorial Representation of “Who am I?” Depicting Religious Traditions and Practices. The image was created using full color markers on a sheet of 8.5” x 11” white paper. “I put a little carpet underneath as a prayer rug and a Qur’an there to symbolize that I’m Muslim. These are my parents. I’m very devoted to them.” Explaining her devotion to her religion she said, “I pray more and I definitely turn to God more for a lot more help. And when I don’t succeed I feel happy because I know that when everyone else leaves you God is still there.” Recognizing her religion gives her strength she added, “That’s one thing that nobody or anything can take away from you. And I think that’s what’s contributed to my feeling of comfort within myself and with my society.”]
In addition to prayer, she sees great value in reading the Qur’an. “You’re talking to God but when you are reading the Qur’an, God is giving you all these answers and it’s just this dialogue you have and with those two combined you can’t feel alone.” As this young Muslim female became involved with her religion, she felt more comfortable. “You get closer to God and God gets closer to you. You have this spiritual relationship with God that turns your life around.”

Likewise, realizing the value of religious practices as a personal choice, a fellow study member expressed, “I think the only difference between prayer my parents taught me and prayer that I practice now is that I am able to focus more. I was able to study exactly what I’m saying in prayer and be able to do it with more of a spiritual sense to it.”

Expounding upon increased spirituality, another participant stated that constantly remembering God is becoming more important for her as well.

I think a lot of people do the rote Islamic actions and they don’t have any belief behind them. So, if you constantly remember God that’s important. I learned that Abraham had this way of speaking to God as if he were there and so I think that kind of stuck with me because I always feel like I used to do that too. Whenever I was having a problem I would just speak directly to God. I think that’s really important because you have to remember what you are doing this for too.

Agreeing that personal reflection is important, a fellow student understands the value of continued religious/spiritual learning and growth. “There are struggles and there is no such thing as perfection. There’s never a level where I’ll be able to say, ‘Ok, I’m done.’ But at the
same time it means that you’re always struggling to strive towards becoming better. There’s always room for improvement.”

**The meaning behind the hijab.**

A fundamental element of the Islamic faith, the hijab has many interpretations for the participants of this study. While some participants believe wearing the hijab preserves dignity, honor, respect and safety, others feel it is not a mandatory aspect of the Islamic faith. Of the seven participants in this research study, four wear the hijab and three do not. All study participants interpret the hijab in relation to the surrounding society and the personal values they have explored and discovered for themselves.

Having traveled to the Middle East, one participant has realized wearing the hijab in America is more of a symbolic thing, rather than simply an expression of modesty. Choosing to wear the hijab herself, she found it essential to explain the duality of the practice.

I want people to see me and know that I am Muslim. Know some of my beliefs and maybe they might have stereotypes against me but I’d hope that by me acting the way that I am it will negate those stereotypes. So, for me it’s more of a symbol. For me it’s about modesty too. And it’s also about how God told you to wear it, and I’m wearing it. It’s an act of submission. Islamic submission. It’s a sacrifice. But, it makes people know who I am as a Muslim.

Another undergraduate believes wearing the hijab has increased her confidence. An outdoor sports enthusiast, she wears her scarf backpacking, swimming and rock climbing. Proud of her capacity to participate in all these activities, she shared,
I’ve tried to make it not be something that [inhibits] me to do anything and I have to thank my parents for that. I think they really encouraged us. Whenever I really wanted to do something they would never bring it up and I think that subtlety gave me the impression that it doesn’t matter. That I could do anything I want.

Finding the correct form of wearing the hijab beautiful and continually trying to perfect each aspect of hijab, she gains clarity on its importance in her life (see Figure 14).

*Figure 14. Self-Pictorial Representation of ‘Who am I?’ Depicting the Meaning Behind the Hijab. The image was created using colored pencils on a sheet of 8.5” x 11” white paper. Describing the meaning of her illustration the participant said, “I’m realizing that hijab is not just a scarf, it's a total way of dress – a total way of action. It’s just become part of me. It’s not something separate from me. It’s something that I enjoy.”*
Currently a junior in college, a fellow student started wearing the hijab for modesty the summer after she completed high school. Proud it identifies her as a Muslim she explained, “I’m making the decision that I want Islam to be the thing that people notice about me first. See me first as a Muslim and then as anything else.” Reflecting on the past three years of wearing the hijab she said,

Wearing the scarf hasn’t changed my personality much. If anything its given me a little bit more self-confidence. It’s helped me mature a little bit quicker than I might have done if I hadn’t been wearing it. I had been a little stagnant before and I progressed a lot. I mean I became more in tune with my religion quicker when I started wearing it.

More importantly, wearing the scarf gives her the opportunity to correct misperceptions and show others that the scarf does not prohibit her from accomplishing her goals. “I think that a lot of people see me and I think they already have their impressions to begin with but then its fun to break those down and change that a little bit.”

Believing her headscarf is a fundamental aspect of who she is, another student instinctively wears it everyday without placing focus on what it symbolizes.

My hijab I let speak for itself. I’m Muslim and I’m showing it. I’m in America and I’m an independent person but I want them to see my personality first before they make judgments because I think people have very preconceived notions about how to see people with a scarf.
Having decided to begin wearing the hijab in the fourth grade, she agreed with the other participants that wearing the hijab is very much a personal decision. “I don’t look down on anybody who doesn’t wear a scarf. I don’t think that should be done. I think it’s very important for you to get there on your own.” Moreover, she asserted the hijab is a small aspect of Islam and doesn’t think it should be over emphasized. “It’s very small. If you consider praying, fasting, all these things being closer to God – that is a lot more important than wearing the scarf.”

In order to reflect the true purpose of the hijab, she is adamant Muslim women must maintain the hijab both physically and socially. Saddened by the slightly provocative clothing of some Muslim females, she wished more of them valued the scarf. “It’s like skinny jeans, a tight top and then a scarf on top. And so that’s not exactly how Islam values the scarf. It’s not just a scarf because the whole hijab is like covering for your whole body.” Rather, she believes the actions of Muslim girls should reflect the importance of self-respect and modest social conduct.

While some Muslim women believe wearing the hijab is decreed within the verses of the Qur’an, one participant felt there is much more flexibility. “I’ve never seen in the Qur’an anywhere where it said that girls have to cover their hair.” Choosing not to wear the headscarf herself she continued, “I respect the decision to do it, but I don’t think it’s mandatory and I feel like I can be just as good a Muslim without the hijab.” Sharing the same sentiment, another study member said, “I read the part and it’s just not clear. It says cover your bosoms and your ornaments. It doesn’t say cover your hair, cover your arms or
your legs to knee length either.” Elaborating on how certain passages hold contradictory messages, she added,

I find most things in the Qur’an are clear, definite answers – this is what you do.

[Wearing the headscarf is] not one of the five pillars of Islam and it’s only stressed in one place in the Qur’an where most stuff is stressed many more times. They make me unsure that it’s what I have to do. And I’m very big on modesty [but] I don’t see a need for it.

Even though a fellow student doesn’t wear the hijab either, she believes that it is an important aspect of being a Muslim woman. “I think it’s very important but it’s something that has to come with time when I’m ready.” Reflecting on her mother’s advice that your intentions must be pure in order to wear the hijab she added, “If your intentions are pure then everything you do will be pure as well. So, I try to follow that philosophy. And my goal is to eventually wear it when I’m ready for it.” Finally, another study participant strongly agrees that wearing the hijab is a personal decision and must seriously be considered.

Actually I thought about wearing the scarf, but it was only because I wanted it to be political and I wanted to show people I’m Muslim. The reason that I would wear it is because I do so many things and I want people to know that you can be a Muslim woman covered up and still do things. There’s no stopping you.

Considering her own intentions, she has chosen not to wear the hijab. Nevertheless, she agreed with other Muslim students who stress Islam does not prevent women from doing things they enjoy.
The Complexities of Muslim Group Membership

During college, female Muslim undergraduates face many complexities engaging with other Muslims on campus. The many different interpretations of the Qur’an resulted in within-group differences among the Muslim student subpopulations. Rather than a homogeneous viewpoint among all members of the group, the intersectionality of religion with ethnicity and/or gender becomes a point of contention. During identity development, the participants either accept or reject broad religious generalizations. They recognize these distinctions among the Muslim student peer group and work towards overcoming social barriers related to differences in ethnicity, gender, religious practices, and style of dress.

Indicating that exploration of personal values and beliefs is an every day occurrence during college, one participant shared,

You just sit down and talk about how your classes were and all of a sudden you’re reflecting on your values and your religion. I used to have a lot of conversations with a lot of Muslims here and I think they’re the people who I felt the most comfortable with because I felt they were the most honest about religion and their struggles.

Exposure to the diversity of personal values within the Muslim community helped another student gain confidence in her own beliefs. “There really isn’t a big threat to being different from the mainstream [Muslim] community. What helped me was knowing other people who were thinking along the same lines as I do.” While a fellow study member has gained a stronger sense of what it means to be Muslim, she remains open to other points of view. “I came here and I have a much stronger sense of what it means to be a Muslim. At the same
time, I’ve become more open to the fact that there are different perspectives.” Understanding everyone views his or her religion differently, one participant said, “I interpret it my way and another person may have another interpretation. There’s loose and strict interpretation.”

Accepting her religious identity, one student understood others may view her differently than she views herself. “I know that when other people look at me, they’re comparing me to other Muslims.” For another participant her Muslim identity is so important she sometimes has difficulty finding comfort in her Muslim campus community.

I know some people maybe don’t identify with the Muslims as much on campus [because] that’s not their primary way of identifying themselves. I struggled with [that] a little bit because for me it’s always been Muslim first. Why shouldn’t you be Muslim first. But then I realized people have different things that they’re passionate about.

For one member, the cultural crossroads and conflicts between Islam and the West is of special contention. “There is a lot of conversation in our community about how much we should take from western culture.” While some Muslims may see Western culture as evil, she believes an American identity is of great value. “I feel it’s really important to realize this is my home. This is where I am. This is the culture I know the best. This is who I am and I love it. I embrace it wholeheartedly.” Also believing that Muslim citizens have a lot to offer to the community, she added, “I think if we start realizing how much we can offer, we can make a big difference.”
Managing within-group differences.

The participants have many diverse interpretations of Islam and the Qur’an highlighting the wide variety of Muslim representations and realities. Personally experiencing differences in values and behaviors within the Muslim community, a study member shared, “There are four schools of thought in Islam.” Believing everyone has the responsibility to learn to respect them all, she added, “Sometimes I feel people judge how Muslim you are [based on] the things you do.” Another participant shared, “I’m not as comfortable with a very, very conservative view. It can be awkward.”

Upon arriving at college, several participants were impressed with how tight-knit the on-campus Muslim student community appeared. Initially feeling intimidated by this atmosphere one participant revealed, “I would feel like a lot of other Muslims were so much more well read than me. And so, I would just be quiet and listen to what they had to say.” After interacting with other Muslim students for a while she added, “They let Islamic scholars do a lot of their own thinking as opposed to thinking about it themselves. So, it’s not that they know more, they just think they know more.” A fellow student also went through a culture shock taking classes in linguistics, such as Persian, Hindu and Arabic. “Where you do question yourself, are classes where the people are supposedly like you. They’re like ‘Why are you wearing a scarf?’ then they start bashing your religion which is weird because you’re supposed to be very closely related.” Understanding the complexities of the Islamic religion another study member said, “Some people know more but I don’t know the
relationship between this person and their God just because what they do or don’t do or what they should or shouldn’t do.”

One participant was quick to point out that many Muslims stick close together rather than branching out to interact with diverse populations.

I see a lot of intermingling, especially among the boys. There aren’t any barriers no matter if one is more religious than another. They are all friends and they seem to have a stronger sense of brotherhood. Among the girls, I don’t know if it is necessarily race-based but it’s definitely where in the U.S. they grew up. For example, the people in the [local area], they all grew up with a really conservative mosque and so they all have really conservative outlooks on life. They definitely intermingle with each other a lot more than they do with other people. And then I also see people from other areas like [just outside of the local area] or maybe even other places around the U.S. change the way they are to be like the people in the [local area].

Similarly, another student discussed Muslims’ tendency to separate into ethnic and gender subgroups, especially during MSA meetings.

Arabs are sitting over here. All the Desis are sitting over here and everybody else is sitting in the middle. It’s not intentionally divided but people do it. People sit on one side and people sit on the other side. A lot of people who come in new are like “Wow, why do they enforce this?” Girls have to sit on one side and some people
have to sit on the other side. They complain about that. A lot of people get disappointed by that and leave. But, that’s how it naturally happens.

Contrary to many of her peers, one undergraduate believes interactions with males should be limited. “The idea of dating in Islam is always brought up and I’m pretty steadfast on the idea that I don’t think it’s allowed.” After discussing the matter with numerous peers and researching the scholarly literature she said, “I looked it up and it still didn’t make any sense to me. But, I’ve seen things and I’ve become more open to the fact that different ideas exist.” Similarly, a fellow study member recognized while many struggles exist between Muslim girls who are modest and those who are not, as well as differences in age groups, differences are inevitable.

It’s something you continuously deal with. I don’t think there will ever be a time where we will all agree and be happy and you know be perfect because that’s not the way the world is. At the same time, there are sometimes where it may be a little bit harder. Sometimes we’ll get a rigid group of people who come in who all really feel strongly about something. But generally speaking I think it is something we always deal with and it’s just a matter of how you as a person take the responsibility of trying to figure out the best way to handle differences. It’s different for everybody and there’s no right answer.

One participant remains hopeful other Muslims will come to understand and accept differences. “I don’t feel like it is the Islamic thing to do. What they’re doing to isolate people based on their situation or circumstances and the similarity of their life and it’s not
what the Prophet taught.” Another student asserted, “Everybody should be able to practice
together. Everybody should realize that no matter how different we are, we’re all under the
same banner and we’re all Muslim.” Taking differences in stride especially after several
years of college, she shared the reality of the Muslim student population. “You meet different
people and they’re all your friends. There are some closer friends than others and that
probably does have a lot to do with the proximity of your cultures and the proximity of your
beliefs.” While one study member is not comfortable with all members of the Muslim
community, she did find comfort knowing they tend to be more understanding of differences.
“In my experience, Muslims understand where you are coming from even if you have a
difference of opinions, or perspectives, or views on the world. They can still understand why
you would say that or [do] something.”

**Ethnic within-group differences.** The participants of this study come from an array
of ethnic backgrounds. Understanding their interactions with others in relation to their
cultural upbringing, they often encounter differences and try to gain awareness and
understanding of others. One participant explained while Muslims are usually segregated by
Shiite or Sunni political views, there are also differences based on race and/or ethnicity.
“Some Mosques are racially or ethnicity separate.” Agreeing that there are nuisances in the
Muslim community, another student expounded upon the segregation of mosques. “The
mosques are completely culturally disparate. There’s a Pakistani mosque. There’s a Saudi
mosque. There’s a Nigerian mosque. There’s also a Somalia mosque. There’s a Palestinian
mosque. Every single nationality has a mosque.” Realizing the friction this creates, especially as the Muslim population increases, she added,

It’s great that people are making new mosques but we don’t want that kind of ethnic disparity to exist. No mosque can close their doors to anybody. That’s against the rules. So, one thing we try to stay away from is cultural superiority.

Several participants discussed how ethnic differences within the Muslim community affect them personally. One participant reflected on the differences between her Bangladeshi culture and Arab Muslim culture. “Especially for girls, they do a lot of all girl parties and dancing. They would wear clothes that people here wear to the bars but they think its ok because they’re only among girls.” Admitting that kind of behavior makes her uncomfortable because that isn’t something she grew up with, she added she is unsure if this can be attributed to her ethnicity. “I know a lot of Bangladeshis who are the same way as me, but I don’t know if I could classify that as Bangladeshi.”

Another student discussed social labels. “I find if Muslims introduce me as Muslim they’ll add that I’m Bosnian right away for some reason. Somehow I have to legitimize the fact that I’m Muslim and White.” Dealing with her Islamic peers she faces many challenges regarding within group differences based on her race. In describing her Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet (see Figure 15) she shared, “Caucasian is the farthest away because I could really care less what race I am.”
She continued to reflect on how irritated she gets when other Muslims cannot segregate her race/ethnicity from her religion.

I get angry! Like all of a sudden you have to be from somewhere else and it bothers me so much because Islam isn’t attached to a country or nationality. You don’t have to be from a specific place to be Muslim. My Islam is meaningful and only stabilized
once I’m from somewhere else? What if I’m not Bosnian? How would you identify me then? Would you not consider me Muslim?

Clearly upset when people automatically make assumptions and label her, she added, “I have a lot of problems. I’ll go pray and people will come to me and say ‘When did you convert to Islam?’ People [assume] you automatically have to be either a convert or from somewhere else.” Recalling a trip to the Middle East, she said, “People didn’t believe I was Muslim. They wanted me to recite the Qur’an to them to prove I was Muslim.” She accredits this skepticism to the fact that she does not wear the headscarf. “I’m not this image out there and I guess it’s bothering me because people are now associating religion with images. You’re Muslim if you fit this [image]. If not, you have to prove it by knowing the Qur’an.”

**Gendered within-group differences.** The participants discussed the disparity between men and women in Islam. For one student, being a woman definitely plays a huge role. “The way men live and the way women live, there’s a parody between them in our religion.” Another participant added, “Women are repeatedly looked at. You’re under a huge amount of scrutiny in every single action you do. It’s a little unfair. Boys are basically allowed to do whatever they will.” Constantly reminded of the restricted cultural liberties of girls versus boys, a fellow student expressed her frustration with these widely held beliefs. I don’t see why boys aren’t expected to learn how to cook. Or, how girls are expected to clean the house all the time. Or why it’s more okay for a boy to be more vocally disagreeing with the community as opposed to a girl.

Conversely, another participant accepts different gender roles and rises above them.
I’ve always been of the mindset that there are distinct differences between males and females and so I never really understand this idea of we have to have equality. You can’t be equal because you’re not equal. A man is not equal to a female in many ways. I was always okay with different gender roles. I don’t like to focus on things like that. I don’t like to get offended by things like that either.

Discussing the nature of Islamic communities in general, one participant shared, “There’s a really big distinction between boys and girls. Girls are always together and boys are always together. There’s not necessarily too much interaction between boys and girls.” When she came to college, she realized these same principles were in place among many of the Muslim students.

In the Islamic community there’s a lot of pressure for boys and girls not to interact and so for me, and a lot of my friends, it was a little bit weird because I didn’t necessarily enjoy always hanging out with those girls and they didn’t necessarily talk about what I wanted to talk about. Or, didn’t want to do the same things as I do.

In addition to the separation of genders, a participant who wears the hijab highlighted the inconsistency of Muslim male behavior.

When you come to college, there’s a whole Muslim group and you’re wearing a scarf so all of the males are very scared to talk to you. Your friend who is not wearing a scarf…they all automatically make so many friends and then you are like “Oh my God what did I do? I don’t want to wear a scarf. I don’t want to be like this if they are going to treat me like that” It just feels so bad. So, I had a lot of [issues] with
being a female…. even to the wider campus community like how they were going to perceive me as a female Muslim.

Considering herself more liberal than most Muslims on campus, another student said, “I don’t limit myself. I don’t think that I cannot be friends with boys. If you say girls can only be friends with girls, then you are isolating half of the population and a lot of people you could learn from.” Reflecting upon the Muslim population at her institution, she added,

There are a lot of Muslims who are like me and have friends who are boys. I would say that most Muslims on campus talk to the opposite gender. I probably wouldn’t go one-on-one to their apartment or dorm room. That would probably make me uncomfortable.

However, differences of place and circumstance result in different reactions. One participant said, “If you are outside talking to someone of the opposite gender, they’re not going to be judging you. But, I’ve heard people say they feel people are judging them when they are seen alone with someone of the opposite gender.” Aware of the double standard between the genders, another participant further explained, “For example I wouldn’t go and hug a guy. But a Muslim male will just find it comfortable for him to hug females without any kind of restraint or without any kind of opposition.” Seeing unfairness in both her culture and her religion, a fellow study member said, “Muslim males are a lot more likely to do things that are offensive.”

Often facing awkward interactions with the opposite gender and working to clarifying boundaries, one participant said, “I would be very uncomfortable. I think I would
understand. I would still feel uncomfortable in the moment but I would be able to laugh it off later.” After two years of college, a fellow study member realized some Muslim males are keeping their distance out of respect for how she chooses to practice her religion.

Sometimes there are guys who you are like “Wow they’re actually conservative and they probably don’t want me to talk to them.” So you see how they act with other girls and if they can talk. [For some Muslim males] they’re just like “We’re just trying to respect you. We don’t know your boundaries.”

Conversely having always had more in common with boys, another student explained, “I’m used to being friends with boys and girls because I don’t [think] just because someone is the opposite gender that there’s necessarily a sexual tension or you should limit yourself.”

Aware that people may judge others no matter what, she added,

Personally, I know I am not doing anything wrong. So, I couldn’t care less if they judge me for it. I mean I would want to know why they do think that there’s something wrong. But, if they are just judging for the sake of judging then that’s not really something that I’m concerned with.

**Style of dress within-group differences.** As previously discussed, there are many different interpretations of the Qur’an, which lead to inconsistent meanings behind the hijab. These variations in style of dress sometimes result in increased tensions within the female Muslim population. More than just a religious practice, modesty in dress and manner is a distinctive expression of Islamic values for the participants of this study. While there is
diversity in the style, usage, and practice of wearing the hijab, not all participants choose to wear the headscarf.

“If Muslims wear something that most Muslims won’t wear or isn’t as conservative or modest, they get a lot of stares from other Muslims,” said one participant. While she is modest in her style of dress, she does not wear the headscarf. Often facing the scrutiny of her Muslim peers, she said, “I don’t think that’s a good thing. I treat people the same because I feel it’s their own business.”

While another student also does not wear the headscarf, she does try to educate herself about the practice. “I’ve talked to people extensively about this and from what I hear it’s just your mindset when you put on the hijab.” Always having to explain to her friends that she does not drink or engage in typical college behaviors, she realized perceptions of the headscarf can have both positive and negative results.

I’ve heard it’s freeing because you become a symbol of a Muslim woman. People know to treat you in a certain way and not expect you to do certain things. They say if you wear the hijab, people just assume these things about you, which could be bad, I guess.

Having different views from most hijabbi women on the way to dress and interact with members of the opposite gender, she added,

I wouldn’t say that just because you wear the hijab, it restricts the people that you talk to or how people treat you. I’ve seen really strong, independent girls, who wear the hijab who have all sorts of friends who are very active on campus. Quite honestly
some of the strongest women I’ve ever met. But then, I’ve also seen a lot of Muslim women who wear the hijab who really isolate themselves and stay within their Muslim communities. So, it really depends on the person and I don’t think that I can generalize.

New to the campus, and the local environment, she continued, “With Muslims there are a lot of things that make you feel part of the community and also kind of isolate you.” Discussing the conservative nature of the local Muslim students on campus, she admitted, “I’ve felt somewhat uncomfortable around them. I feel they have been learning the same way of thinking since they were very little and they haven’t really explored other ways the world can be viewed.” Wanting others to appreciate diversity and to gain a sense of belonging at college, she added, “I don’t want all my friends to have the same opinion as me. I also don’t want someone to look down on me just because I don’t agree with them.” Even though she tries to avoid closed-minded individuals, she does not allow them to influence her behaviors. “If you’re going to let other people limit the way you’ll act in public, then it will be limiting. But, if you are comfortable with your decisions and with yourself and your religion, then it won’t be as limiting.”

Another participant noticed how many Muslim women who elect to wear the hijab choose all Muslim or all hijabbi friends. Recognizing how they cannot take advantage of student trips unless a brother or another Muslim women also attends she revealed, “I’m Muslim but I feel more isolated from the community because I don’t always have to have a Muslim friend who has to go with me.” Choosing not to wear the headscarf herself, she
shared, “Sometimes I don’t feel like I fit in because I don’t wear it and I have a different view on when or why I should wear it. And, the whole questioning of whether it’s mandatory.” Debating the words of the Qur’an with other Muslims, she finds herself always having to explain why she does not wear the headscarf. “You only think it says [to wear it] because this is how people have just continued based on culture and tradition. But, you don’t really know. There isn’t a picture in here depicting things. Or a step-by-step manual.” More importantly, discussions with hijabbis often result in illustrating there is no consistent message. Sometimes decisions are made strictly from interpretation of doctrine. While others are culturally reflexive based on years of family tradition.

While a fellow student has chosen to wear the headscarf, she has encountered similar problems with how other Muslims perceive her. “Muslim girls who don’t wear the scarf were really scared of the fact that I wear a scarf because they came from communities were girls who wore scarves looked down on girls who didn’t.” Initially feeling isolated from non-hijabbis, she has come to realize that both Muslims and non-Muslims maintain stereotypes. “They met me and they thought that I automatically had all these views of them when I didn’t. They realized that after they got to know me, they were the ones that had prejudices. It wasn’t me.”

Despite the fact that another undergraduate has chosen to wear the headscarf, she finds that people have a problem with the way she wears it because she wears it with a little bit of hair showing. Commenting on how Muslim males make assumptions that hijabbi women strictly adhere to no interactions with the opposite gender, she said, “Actually
sometimes [non-hijabbi] girls are the more conservative.” Having found her place in the Muslim community at her institution, she shared, “It’s been a lot easier to talk to people. But there’s new people [every] year and you have to go through the same thing every year with all them guys to show them you’re just a normal person.”

Another participant also reflected, “When it comes to talking to guys there’s always a little awkwardness with some because a lot of guys, especially Muslim guys, they see hijab and think that means we can’t talk to them at all, like we’re off limits.” Also emphasizing Muslim males treat Muslim women differently depending on the hijab, another study participant said,

They’ll go out with girls who don’t wear hijab. Not necessarily dating, though sometimes they do date. They’ll go out to parties and concerts and etc. I mean that’s some of them. Some of them are not necessarily like that. But, they definitely do perceive them better. They think that sometimes Muslim girls with hijab are definitely a lot more strict and a lot more prudish and they won’t talk to Muslim males.

In the Muslim community, there are many stigmas associated with the hijab. She shared, “There’s a big divide between girls who wear the scarf and girls who don’t wear the scarf.” Discussing the different ways people practice and cover, she added, “I don’t think it’s oppressive for anybody if they do it themselves.” Whereas numerous countries in the Middle East strictly enforce Muslim women to cover, Muslims in America are not so stringent.
“This is a free country. I’m living here, at least I can wear my scarf and at least I can practice my religion.”

The role of the Muslim Student Association (MSA).

While all seven participants are either currently active in their MSA or have been in the past, the majority expressed how beneficial the association can be for the development of identity. Being from out of state, a study participant arrived to college nervous and feeling out of place because so many people already knew each other. Thinking back on those feelings of isolation, she explained how instrumental the MSA was in making her feel a part of the college community. “The Muslim community felt like a really big warm welcoming place where I could feel comfortable and lean back on if I was ever sad or lonely or needed help or something.” Similarly, another student likes the safety to explore and learn more about being Muslim. “I feel there’s more encouragement and teachings of the things that I didn’t know and it’s much easier to be Muslim.”

Likewise, a fellow study participant believed having people of similar backgrounds to talk to is a real benefit. “Just getting to know other people who are in the same position as me and who were really honest about things. They have a lot of analytical conversations and debates.” Having embraced her religion for herself, she got involved with the MSA when she came to college. “It felt good to be able to have people who can keep you grounded in your religion. Having a really strong base that you can fall back on if you ever are getting confused or lose your way.” When asked to provide an example, she replied,
When I first came [to college], I wasn’t exactly sure if it was okay for me to be that close to boys or things like that. Because those were things that my parents have always told me are not okay. So, when you have people your own age saying the same thing, you think harder about maybe this isn’t just an aged belief.

“I love MSA,” said a fellow undergraduate. “I didn’t have that community in high school. That was very separate. School was one thing and then friends and Muslims and Islam was another thing. But here it’s all meshed together.” Today, as a dedicated member of the MSA, she expressed, “It’s really, really cool to be able to work with the Muslims on campus and to be able to help provide a network for all Muslims on campus.” She believed one of the most essential aspects of being a member of the MSA is your role as the face of Islam on campus.

Whenever you work for Islam you realize you have to look at yourself first critically and everything you do…I mean it’s a burden in many ways because all of a sudden when people see Islam, they look at you and say you are going to represent Islam on this campus…People see you and associate that with Islam. That was something that I didn’t have before, so I think that played a big role just because all of a sudden you realize that you are representing a very large population and it makes you think more about all the actions you take and all that you do. But, I feel it’s a good responsibility to have. It’s something that I’m glad I had because better that than the alternative where you’re kind of shying away from your identity.
Currently living on campus after residing off-campus during her freshman year, another study member has become more active in the MSA. Through her involvement, she has been able to safely explore her religion. “We’re all very into learning about our religion. We’re all pretty serious about doing it correctly and not caring what we have to give up to do that. We always try to keep a balance between everything.” Enjoying her exposure to different cultures and interpretations of Islam, she said she especially enjoys “having haliqas where we gather together and remember God and thank Him.” Another participant also enjoys the welcoming nature of the MSA. “The MSA is awesome here. They have a really good sense of community and they are really inclusive to everybody, even to non-Muslims.” Echoing this enthusiasm a fellow member of the study enjoys being surrounded by people of different backgrounds and a wide variety of ideas. “We constantly have discussions about different religions that challenge what you think. Not necessarily challenge, but you are opened up to different perspectives.” She agreed the MSA is vital to her sense of belonging. “As soon as you go into MSA you feel like ‘Wow, I’m where I belong!’ The MSA makes me feel really connected.”

**Representing Islam and Educating Others**

Despite the complexities within the Muslim student population, the participants feel more comfortable around people of the same faith. However, the participants are also aware that many people base their opinions of Muslim women on images and misrepresentations seen in popular media. Examining assumptions and exploring stereotypes others may hold about their ethnicity, gender or religion, the participants expressed a call to action for all
Muslims to overcome popular misperceptions and obstacles facing the Muslim population by representing Islam and educating others. Wanting to engage diversity, the majority of participants agreed it is their responsibility to challenge others to seek accurate information about Islam and learn more about who these women are.

While the participants have a strong desire to educate others, they often face confrontations in the classroom. One participant shared her experience in an Islamic religion course. “I was the only Muslim in it. So I felt like I was a little bit more knowledgeable than most of the other students. When they did state something that was obviously not true, I felt I had a duty to fix that.” Taking pride in being able to educate others, another participant said, “In some classes you get singled out as the Muslim and you get to express yourself a lot which is good.” Commenting on the role of the many interfaith programs and events at the institution, a fellow student shared, “We have a lot of events and people do come out to these events. At a liberal arts school, people do value these things.”

As a Muslim woman who wears the headscarf one study member said, “Being a Muslim in America is a conversation starter for a lot of people. They see the scarf and they ask why are you wearing it?” Currently living in an interfaith themed housing unit on campus, she makes an effort to educate her residence hall mates about the Islamic faith while at the same time learning about other religions herself. “I really want people to see that Muslim women are really approachable if anyone ever needs anything…being good citizens…being an example in the classroom…in every aspect.” While meeting new people is sometimes challenging, discussing religion upon first introductions makes it a lot harder
for this participant. “You don’t really talk about religion when you meet someone, so the fact that you’re bringing those to the forefront can be intimidating.”

Understanding that attending a liberal arts college is an important element of educating others, a fellow student said, “People are open to pretty much anything.” Enjoying that others are asking questions and taking advantage of these opportunities to present her faith, she added,

I’ve had a lot more people who were interested and asking questions and that’s really cool because I never had that before. It’s common for people to ask question about the hijab and other Muslim beliefs and practices. Typical questions include, Do you wear your hijab because your parents told you to? or What it really means? or Are you going to have an arranged marriage?

Another participant agreed, “People are interested and want to know “Why are you Muslim?” I can answer things and hopefully, if there are stereotypes, try to do something about that.”

Constantly confronted with questions from non-Muslims about Islamic practices a study member shared, “I’m totally happy to explain it and why I choose to make a decision to be a certain way. But, there are some people who are closed-minded. So, it’s usually hit-or-miss how comfortable I can be with non-Muslims.” Usually sticking to the facts and what the Qur’an says, she emphasized, “If I’m veering from the facts to my own analysis, I really let them know that this is the mainstream way of thinking. This is what conservative scholars say. This is what liberal scholars say. This is what I think.” Realizing others ignorance is a result of media representations, she added, “It shouldn’t be frustrating because
this is obviously something that’s in the media and I understand why people think like that.”
After further reflection and still frustrated by these misperceptions she stated, “Even I can understand that someone who is really well read could still think that Muslims don’t have a lot of liberties.”

Compared to many of her Muslim peers, one participant is very active on campus. Rather than only being involved in MSA, she is happy to represent Islam as a member of several student organizations. “I think it’s cool that I can go and work for the [student newspaper] and then there will be a scarved girl going and covering the chancellor.”

Strongly advocating involvement in campus activities as a method to help educate others about Muslims, she added

Sometimes we volunteer to do the security for football games. Sometimes you get really bad comments from some of the Southern people who are like “Wow only at [institution] you would have Muslims being the security people.” When you’re involved people realize that there’s more to [Muslims] then what’s on the news.

“Things have definitely made me angry in the past that students have said,” shared a fellow study member. “But I realize they really can’t help it. I feel they have a very media definition of Islam and Muslims.” Making matters worse, she relayed, “People not only have views from the media but it’s reinforced by family and community.” Understanding this is the reality she has to deal with she added,
It’s hard to explain your point, [especially when it] goes against the media. A lot of people will shy away from conversations because it will make them feel uncomfortable and it brings up tension. But it’s something you have to deal with.

For another participant, peers’ ignorance about Muslims in America frustrated her. Upon the subject of a disconnection between Americans and people of the Islamic faith, she spoke up. “I’m an American. I was born here. I’ve lived here all my life. I don’t see any disconnect at all. I think I’m just as much of an American as the person sitting next to me.” A fellow undergraduate who wears the headscarf agreed, “It’s natural to feel very pinpointed” in the classroom. Recalling an Israel/Palestine class, she shared,

I was the only Muslim in there who was visibility Muslim because I was the only one who wore a scarf. On the first day, we introduced ourselves and [discussed] what we knew about the Palestine/Israel conflict and what we thought about it in basic terms. I feel people constantly thought – she’s a Muslim, she’s going to be pro-Palestinian.

Placing great value on her education, she always welcomes the opportunity to express differences of opinion. “For the sake of asking questions and being a productive member in class and not just constantly viewing things from one perspective, I constantly challenge people’s thoughts about me.” In many of her other classes, she often felt an obligation to speak for the Muslim population. “That’s happened to me in the past. Not necessarily the teacher wants me to, but I feel a responsibility to.” When discussing similar issues, she revealed as a freshman she found it hard to challenge older students in class. “I didn’t really have the power to challenge them because these people have been studying these things for
four years.” However, today she is more confident in herself and welcomes the opportunity to challenge others.

While the participants have little problems educating their peers, that does not hold true for faculty and other authority figures. Recalling a class she took on documenting communities, another student shared, “In that class we were supposed to make a documentary about a specific community at [institution]. So, I chose Muslim women.” While the professor liked the topic, she felt she held too many false impressions of Muslim women. “My professor liked using my topic as an example. She would say the most ridiculous things about how Muslim women are restricted and how they don’t have liberties. It made me want to make a really good documentary.” While she successfully completed the project, she is unsure if it helped change the professor’s understanding of Muslim women.

It worked out really well. She liked my documentary. She didn’t really say anything about whether it changed her views or not. I tried really hard to focus on the fact that stereotypes people have are really culturally-based and not religiously-based. And so, in America where everyone has equal rights, Muslim women aren’t restricted by their religion by doing certain things. That’s political things that are happening in the Middle-East or other Muslim countries.

Another participant had a similar experience when a professor said Islam was an oppressive religion that denies people their freedom. “I got so upset that this was a professor talking to students who may not know about Islam. And they may go away believing this crap.” Clearly upset by western bias, she raised her hand and said, “Excuse me. I’m Muslim
and I don’t see myself as oppressed and [the Qur’an] does not tell me to be oppressed.” With her emotions on the surface, she continued by expressing how the incident empowered her to work towards changing these false perceptions of Muslims.

This is a big deal if somebody is spreading these things and this is what people think of you and who you are. You’re not being treated equally and you’re not understood. I think that it really defined me – people need to understand. People should know this because its not fair that my people are being defined by stereotypes, which somebody else decided to make up – who has no knowledge about Muslims. So, that really defined me as the one that needs to go out there and start telling people and showing them who Muslims are and what they do.

Sometimes, classroom discussions and assignments not only help participants teach others, but they also learn for themselves. One undergraduate had just such an experience in her African American history class. During a classroom discussion on slavery, she struggled to understand how an African American could claim themselves as an American. Connecting this to her experience as a Muslim clarified the concept. “I related that to I was a Muslim. For some people there’s this disconnect – you can’t be Muslim and be American. But, I never felt that because for me you can be a Muslim and you can be an American.”

After completing a writing assignment for the class, her professor asked to read it aloud so the class could have a discussion about it. “I was very confident being able to say how I feel, this is how it is.” Realizing how vital these conversations are, she added, “Every experience I
have with somebody, it doesn’t matter if you are Muslim or not, it’s a way to educate
yourself. If I talk to anybody I usually get something out of that conversation.”

Some participants knew from an early age educating others included being a good
example. “I was the only Muslim girl in high school. I had nobody else around who wore a
scarf,” shared one participant. “I used to always be scared when somebody asked me why I
wore a scarf. Or, why do you fast?” While part of being a Muslim woman is being
submissive, she wasn’t sure how to answer these questions. Reflecting on these early
interactions, she said, “They force you to think about your religion and why you are doing
what you do.” From these high school experiences, she became more conscious of her
behaviors and reasoning behind them. “I basically represented my religion. If I did anything
wrong it would be ‘Oh that’s how Muslims are.’ So, you always have to keep on track.”
Slightly apprehensive because she is not completely sure of what that role entails, she
continued, “I’m giving them impressions which is scary. I don’t know if I’m educating them.
I’d say they are watching me and they’re learning a little bit more about Islam.”

“I definitely feel I’m a symbol for Islam and I’m a lot more approachable when it
comes to asking questions about religion,” said another participant who wears the headscarf.
Always trying to challenge preconceived notions about women and Islam, she revealed, “I
really feel in order to get rid of these kinds of stereotypes you just have to show your own
personality.” In middle and high school, she didn’t always present a consistent image. “It
used to be among my friends, especially my Muslim friends, I would act completely different
and then in class I would be really quiet and not speak at all.” More secure in who she is and
what she represents, she wants others to understand the diversity within the female Muslim population. “They’re not the same. They are multifaceted. They don’t believe in the same things. There’s a lot of people who have completely different beliefs. The scarf has different values to different people. Muslim identity has different values to different people.”

Figure 16. Self-Pictorial Representation of “Who am I?” Depicting Representing Islam and Educating Others. The image was created using monochromic color markers on a sheet of 8.5” x 11” white paper. Describing her illustration of the pages of the Qur’an she stated, “I wrote in Arabic, ‘In the name of Allah, the most gracious, most merciful.’” Continuing to explain her drawing she added, “I put Muhijabba which means I wear hijab because that’s what people see first when they see me. When people see Islam, they look at you and say you are going to represent Islam on this campus.” Recognizing her own growth in college, she shared, “[Institution name] has greatly shaped my identity. I am really interested in Interfaith – activities, friends and for a career in the future.”
A fellow study member who began wearing the headscarf the summer after high school had similar experiences in college. “Whenever you interact with anybody, you have to realize that whether or not you want to represent Islam, you’re going to be representing Islam.” Understanding and appreciating the responsibilities that come with her outward expression of Islam, especially when interacting with non-Muslims, she added, “So all my interactions with people who aren’t Muslim, I have to really represent Islam the best way that I know how.” When asked to create a self-pictorial representation of who she is, she became slightly apprehensive about her artistic skills and decided writing expressions and phrases were easier. Writing in multiple languages, Arabic, English and Hindi, she explains while her religion is at the core of her identity and usually the first thing people notice about her, she embraces the opportunity to engage in diverse dialogues (see Figure 16).

Facing stereotypes and misperceptions throughout all facets of her life, one participant hopes to make a difference at college. Bothered that college administrators have little understanding of the Muslim population, she offered some insight.

When you go to office hours with a professor, if it’s a male most Muslim women would prefer the door open even though they say come in and close the door. And a lot of times they come and put their arm around us and it just doesn’t make us feel as comfortable. I definitely feel that there should be some sort of education for the staff on the needs of Muslim women.

She readily suggested if the university understood the gender divide in Islam and respected the barriers between males and females, then Muslim women would feel more comfortable
because the institution would actively work to keep them safe. For example, she said, “It would be awesome if you could have a dorm where guys aren’t even allowed on the halls.” She also indicated that a dedicated prayer room and women only gym hours would “be so awesome for us. Muslim girls would love that.” At the same time, she understands, “part of the responsibility is on us.”

**Summary of Identity is Understood Through a Religious Interpretative Lens**

Religious identity was seen by all seven participants as the most salient aspect of their identities. The participants rationalize who they are and how they fit into the world around them through a religious interpretative lens. Drawing upon their Islamic faith for guidance, the participants face within-group social barriers related to differences in ethnicity, gender, religious practices, and style of dress. While managing conflicts and resolving differences takes time and effort, the participants are keen to the importance of maintaining healthy relationships. Furthermore, they believe the best tool to eradicate misperceptions of who they are as Muslim women is setting a good example and educating others when the time and place are appropriate.

**Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter provides a review of the research design, participant characteristics in aggregate, and the study’s major findings. Using the qualitative tradition of phenomenology, the findings begin with a description of data analysis procedures followed by an overall composite of the meaning and essence of identity development for female Muslim undergraduates. The chapter concludes with an overview of supplemental data collection
methods, including identity map representations, participant descriptions of those representations, and document analysis.

The focus of this chapter was on a fairly under-researched but critical element for student development in higher education: the process of identity negotiation during college for female Muslim undergraduates. While there was diversity within the participant group based on individual demographics, there were more similarities among the participants than differences when it came to their reflections on the nature of social interactions and the multiple aspects of their identity, specifically ethnicity, gender and religion. The results of this study suggest students, regardless of ethnic background, family upbringing, or life experiences, identify three major themes as essential for identity development and maintenance.

The first major component consists of the fluid and dynamic nature of identity construction and reconstruction. Participants constantly deal with negotiating and managing personal perceptions of self with the perception of others. The second component consists of the multifaceted nature of identity for female Muslim students. The participants in this study indicated that ethnicity, gender or religion is ineffective in describing who they are. Rather they interpret their multiple social dimensions of self as tightly interwoven into the fabric of their overall identity. The final component is identity is understood through a religious interpretative lens. The participants come to understand themselves and their interactions with others through the personal principles and values adopted from Islam. Moreover,
finding a healthy balance of support and challenges from family members, peers, and the campus environment are vital for exploring identities.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to understand how Muslim female undergrads navigate social interactions and negotiate perceptions of self as college students. The research question guiding the investigation was what is the nature of identity development during college for late adolescent Muslim female students? To best understand their lived college experiences, it was ideal to explore their personal upbringing and backgrounds, current experiences, how they view themselves, and other contextual elements that have the potential to influence their identity. These participants shared their stories and I sought to make sense of how they constructed the multiple aspects of their identities, as well as the influence of social interactions in and out of the classroom during their college matriculation. Inductive data analysis revealed three interrelated concepts involved in the process of identity development.

This chapter presents an overview of the study’s relevant findings and their link to the related research question and literature on identity development and Muslim culture. After discussing my reflections, I present the implications for practice focusing on the impact of multicultural campus awareness and student engagement with diverse populations on identity development. The final section offers suggestions for future research.

Summary of Significant Findings

The findings illustrate the complexity of female Muslim identity and provide a number of new perspectives and understandings of the nature of identity development for female Muslim undergraduates. From a thorough analysis of the data, three significant
findings emerged including identity is fluid and dynamic, identity is multifaceted, and identity is understood through a religious interpretative lens. The students significantly recognized the importance of identity exploration and commitment to personal beliefs, values, and goals. Interpersonal relationships were instrumental in guiding individuals through this exploration and how they fit into the world around them. Second, one identity is inefficient for describing female Muslim identity. Their ethnic, gender and religious identities are tightly interwoven and cannot be sufficiently understood in isolation. Third, despite the complexities of the heterogeneous nature of Muslim belief structures, female Muslim undergraduates use a religious interpretative lens to make meaning of self, their interactions with others, and group membership.

Still, the study shows more similarities among the participants than differences when it came to their reflections on the nature of social interactions and the multiple aspects of their identity, specifically ethnicity, gender and religion. The findings affirm and expand the cannon of literature on identity development, Muslim culture, and symbolic interactionism. As an interesting surprise, participants frequently saw relationships between and among their multiple dimensions of their identity, specifically the trifecta of ethnicity, gender and religion, which partially challenges the multiple dimensions of identity model (Abes et al, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Identity is Fluid and Dynamic

The first key finding reflects the fluid and dynamic nature of identity. Female Muslim undergraduates actively construct their ethnic, gender and religious identities during
college as a result of being challenged, accepted, or rejected by others. A combination of both internal choices and external conflicts challenge participants as they construct and reconstruct their identity. Consistent with psychosocial student development theories (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1981; Josselson 1987, 2005; Marcia, 1966; Parks, 2000), the study participants’ sense of self developed as a result of both positive and negative challenges and rewards. Ethnic, gender and religious identities are clearly central to students psychological functioning during college and change over time as they have different social interactions and life experiences.

Just as Kulwicki (2000) acknowledged the family unit as the foundation of Islamic society, the participants of this study indicated close relationships with family members are essential to their healthy personal development. Even though the participants come with varying cultural and religious values, they each revealed their family upbringing was the basis of their self-perceptions before they came to college. So much so, they defined themselves and their values in the manner their parents designated for them. It was not until they entered middle school that many of the participants were confronted with different and conflicting ideas outside of their family units. As the participants tried to conceptualize and practice their parents’ ethnic and Islamic values within American society, they struggled with how they would define their identities (Barazangi, 1996; Eisonlohr, 1996; Phinney, 1996).

For the study’s participants, the earliest stages of development occurred in the immediate wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Because of this event, external and internal societal forces made it inescapable for the participants to be unaffected by the drama
surrounding these world events. Confronted with externally and self-imposed social isolation during early social interactions, participants had to reevaluate their meanings and self definitions (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). They were female Muslim youths growing up in a new world. Trying to maintain the standards of Islam and inherited cultural values caused dissonance between their self-concept and the way American society categorizes and labels them. Gunel (2007) found lack of trust, conflict and cultural differences lead to discomfort and social isolation for Muslim youth. Similarly, some participants had to navigate the ignorance and misperceptions of classmates, faculty and administrators during their most formative years.

Participants confronted ethnic, cultural and religious challenges at the same time they were trying to discover who they are and create dynamic relationships among the student body. Sirin and Fine (2007, 2008) found some suffered humiliation and mistreatment while others rejected discrimination and worked towards educating others. For this study’s participants, having to navigate ignorance and misperceptions in their adolescent post 9/11 world helped shape and mold who they would become. Rejecting stereotypes and overcoming the ignorance of others regarding their religion and societal perceptions were important factors in participants’ decisions throughout their development.

While the aftermath of September 11 influenced their awareness and changing patterns of self-identification during middle school, some residual affects continued to frustrate participants. Thus, college became an even more important developmental time in participants’ lives as they form and reform identities to carry into adulthood (Evans et al,
Rather than simply accepting ascribed social identities, the participants made individual choices to declare or refute them. Drawing upon their previous experiences and coming from a range of familial backgrounds, participants made different collegiate curricular and co-curricular choices and interacted with peers in culturally similar and dissimilar ways. Linking their self-perceptions with the perceptions of the larger social structure on their college campus, the participants intentionally, actively and creatively worked towards constructing their identities in their new environment (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). These changing environmental influences and exposure to new people and ideas during college foster the re-examination of parental teachings and cultural heritage and the desire to seek additional knowledge prior to forming their own opinion. According to Chickering (1969), students discover emotions, feelings, independence and achievement during the transition to college. Seeing themselves within post 9/11 social and historical contexts allowed the participants to gain a sense of how they are seen and evaluated by others.

The participants indicated peer interactions had the most influence on feelings of alienation or acceptance (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Recognizing their identity as different from peers of dissimilar social classifications, the participants attempted to manage conflicts through productive channels. The development of a strong social identity often results from reflection and increased self-awareness. While ethnic, gender and religious identity were not uniform across the participant sample, the participants worked toward finding increased comfort with ambiguity and doubt in order to advance their development. Most often,
ethnicity is created and recreated by examining competing rewards and sanctions attached to them. Understanding themselves in relation to other ethnic group members and participating in within-group traditions (Phinney, 1996; Skowron, 2004) created a safe sense of inclusion and connectedness to others.

Family cultural and religious expectations and societal gender roles often affect how the participants are socialized, treated, and judged by themselves and others. Consistent with Josselson (1987, 2005), the participants are motivated to assert their individuality while at the same time maintain connection to others. While the female Muslim students in this study are composed of multiple roles, values, beliefs and social affiliations, they all strongly contest the notion that being a woman limits them in any way from accomplishing their goals. Their comments reflect strength in their gender identity. Yet, even this strength can be challenged in a typical college environment, such as the classroom. A classroom headed by a male professor or attended by a majority of male students might cause pause or reflection on the student’s classroom participation. Like most classrooms, different student backgrounds and varying opinions will arise and are cultivated in higher education. Thus, intentionally creating avenues to explore cultural traditions and religious interpretations, the participants’ worldview extended beyond family during adolescence. Discussing religion with similar and dissimilar peers and using critical reflection, they established their own beliefs and values as they independently interpreted what their religion means to them (Fowler, 1981). Thus, sharing similar backgrounds or experiences appeared to be an important factor in the salience of ethnicity, gender or religion for all participants. Even though the participants’ are more
comfortable around others of similar backgrounds, they are equally interested in engaging with diverse others.

Participants’ statements revealed involvement in college student activities and exposure to a wide variety of individuals from various cultural backgrounds greatly influenced their development. Recognizing the magnitude of this influence, they relished the opportunities to engage with dissimilar peers, different frames of thinking, and multiple ways of living. Experiencing little conflict regarding their social identities, the participants suggested shared meanings and common interests (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), not ethnicity, gender or religion, were the basis of many of their friendships and choices to engage in the plethora of campus activities. Whether intramurals, academic related or, as in the case of the MSA, religious affiliated, it was the students’ experiences and relationships garnered through these interests that created personal change.

As noted in the literature review, supporting student development requires deliberately creating opportunities to interact with students of different cultural backgrounds and engage in varying cultural experiences (Cheng & Zhao, 2006; Harper, 2008; Hurtado, 2008; Kuh, et al., 1991). During the process of presenting and constructing their identities, the participants created meaning during their social interactions and defined situations of coexistence with others during college (Blumer, 1969). This particular student population had to deal with an unprecedented rise in cultural conflict between the Muslim world and the traditionally non-Muslim American college campus. At the same time, and under such historical circumstances as post 9/11, they tried not to let others’ values or perspectives
negatively affect their self-identity. Despite this dramatic exploration of the positive and negative facets of their college environment, the participants opened themselves to new ideas, explored in and out of the classroom, and grew as individuals, while remaining steadfast to their core identity.

The data clearly shows that participants go through a process of questioning who they are and how they fit into the world around them. Whether family socialization, environmental influences, or perceptions and experiences with prejudices and stereotypes, the participants’ self-identification is constantly evolving as awareness increased and conflicts are successfully managed. The more they experience challenges to their sense of self in relation to society, the more it impacts their identity formation. Encountering a wide variety of individuals and events over the lifespan required female Muslim undergraduates to make many different personal choices. The college reality for each student was not only the experiences they had while on campus but included the dynamic nature of all their previous experiences before they began their first day of freshman classes.

They came to college as individuals with varying backgrounds and a multitude of cultural lineages, family upbringings, and national origins. As diverse as their life experiences were before college, it was also during their undergraduate years the students participated in the vast offerings available on a twenty-first century college campus. From student volunteer organizations to the classroom to the cliché social gathering, the undergraduates faced the full scope of the college environment and each one lived in it differently. No two participants had the same experiences before or during college. Through
the construction of identity, the participants addressed social boundaries and worked towards making meaning of their identities. Greatly influenced by their interactions with the world around them, the participants confirm the concept of the ongoing construction of identity as fluid and dynamic.

**Identity is Multifaceted**

The second key finding highlights that one social descriptor is inefficient in describing female Muslim undergraduates. For example, some participants identified religion as intertwined with ethnicity or gender individually or simultaneously. Unable to separate these social identities, the participants discovered ethnicity, gender and religion often reinforce one another.

While most identity development models regard a single aspect of social identity, such as ethnicity (Phinney 1990, 1996), gender (Josselson, 1987, 2005; Marcia, 1966), or spirituality (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000, 2005), the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model takes into consideration the intersection of multiple aspects of identity (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). This study provides further evidence that multiple elements of identity are mutually influential on female Muslim undergraduates’ self-conceptualizations. While ethnicity, gender and religion are the building blocks of the participants’ identities, they cannot be viewed in isolation. Clearly, individuals are members of more than one social reality and have many overlapping identities. In order to understand identity, all the multiple parts of an individual must be considered in conjunction with one another.
The participants provided insight into what makes certain social identities more salient than others and the interrelationships among them. While earlier research examined social identities independently (Jones & McEwen, 2000), Abes, et al. (2007) raised questions about how social identities might interact and the possible influences of larger social structures. Similarly, to the foundational meaning-making capacity explained by Abes, et al. (2007), the participants frequently saw relationships between and among their multiple dimensions of their identity, specifically religion, gender and ethnicity. Upon reviewing the Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheets, four of seven participants rated gender and then ethnicity as the most prominent aspects of their identity after religion. The other three participants rated ethnicity and then gender as most significant after religion. Thus managing multiple identities during college is critical to their healthy development. Regardless of how others view the participants, their personal choices form their ethnic, gender and religious identities. Blending these multiple components of identity, individuals create a distinct individual identity.

Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Multiple Dimensions of Identity Model suggests single aspects of identity cannot be understood without considering other dimensions of self and influential contextual factors. Whereas the model considers singular aspects of identity and the potential to actively negotiate more than one at one time, this study’s findings show female Muslim students define ethnicity, gender and religion as interwoven into the fabric of their identity so tightly they cannot separate those aspects of self. Not only are participants constantly negotiating more than one aspect of self, they cannot clearly distinguish between
the different aspects of their identity. Rather than having a range of salient singular aspects of identity, the participants understand the collective existence of their multiple aspects of self. As social identities are highly influential on one another, the participants synthesize the notion that crossing two (gender and religion) or more (ethnicity, gender and religion) marginalized identities forge a singular identity – for example – a female Muslim or a female Bosnian Muslim.

While limited because it only provides a snapshot of identity at one point in time, Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model is helpful in understanding the role of the environment and interactions with others in influencing identity. As stated previously, informal and formal meanings shape students everyday college environments. While, childhood and early adolescent experiences are part of the meaning making process, this study focuses on the participants’ college matriculating years as the major contextual influence on their lives. While participants admitted the first few weeks of college were daunting, they also indicated the welcoming and accepting climate towards Muslims on their college campus provided a sense of belonging. In agreement with Denzin (1992), participants came to realize how their multiple social identities influenced their interpretations of their college experiences. Creating feelings of attachment to others during college shapes the way the participants think and act (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). Sometimes believing others do not understand the complex nature of their identity, participants found it nearly impossible to manage one social identity at a time when faced with challenges. Differences in relationships and group consciousness often led to dissonance due to the interconnectedness of the participants
ethnic, gender and religious identities. Overcoming adversity caused participants to re-think who they are, who they want to become and how they fit into the world around them.

For instance, the visible characteristics associated with being Muslim had an affect on the four participants who wear the hijab or headscarf. Wearing such a visible statement, some garnered personal strength from this outward expression of their identity. Other participants found strength from private interactions with similar peers, such as Muslim Student Association meetings. Often times, societal labels are also powerful sources of identity and social experience. On one end of the spectrum, individuals allow others to define who they are, while on the other end individuals make conscious choices of identification. Unable to separate societal views from personal conscious choices, the participants revealed how they came to perceive their relationships with others. The need to establish a sense of belonging to a larger community helped shape and reshape their sense of self (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Schlossberg, 1989). Thus, the outcomes of this study suggest all aspects of identity are salient in different contexts, such as interactions with family, campus culture or personal relationships.

**Identity is Understood through a Religious Interpretative Lens**

The last key finding showed how important religion is in the lives of female Muslim undergraduates. Consistent with the literature, all seven participants indicated religion is a key component of their personal and social identity (Barazangi, 2004; Haddad, et al., 2006; Zine, 2006) and is integral to the formation of their beliefs, values and meanings (Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000). Driven by an internal sense of identity, being Muslim overpowers all
other ascribed or achieved social identities for this group of female Muslim undergraduates. While individuals construct and maintain a core identity, social identity is externally expressed in relation to society and culture (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). For the participants of this study, a religious core identity, or enduring self concept, supersedes ethnicity, gender and all other external identities and is the basis for their personal values and relationships. While they come from different countries of origin, ethnicities, and Islamic interpretations, the ideology of unity of all believers around a shared faith, regardless of the diversity of belief, cultures and traditions, permeates every aspect of the participants lives (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

In this research, there is evidence of the importance of meaning-making, the integration of various aspects of self and the stability and change of personal and social identities across time and context, thus reinforcing the conceptualizations of the complex construct of identity development postulated by Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes et al. (2007). Participants strongly suggested an Islamic worldview is essential to developing, maintaining, and negotiating the multiple aspects of their identities. Their Islamic faith provides a source of meaning, guidance, consolation, and community (Afridi, 2001; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007) and serves as the interpretative lens through which all interactions and experiences are filtered. Using faith to guide them and maintaining traditions helped them reaffirm their religious identity while gaining security in managing the many new challenges college presents.
While all seven women interviewed identified themselves as raised with Islamic traditions, the intensity of parental influence varied from one participant to the next. According to Haddad, et al. (2006), Muslim women differ in the degree to which they choose to identify with mainstream American culture. While the participants of this study expected some level of assimilation into American life, they still hold steadfast to their traditional Islamic practices and traditions. Struggling to affirm traditional values while functioning in 21st century American society, the participants encountered individual acts of religious discrimination and social and political events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which made issues of religion even more salient.

Just as Peek (2005a) discovered in her study of Muslim student identity development during crisis, the participants’ statements revealed religious identity became more central to their sense of self. Becoming more religious during college, these women continued to embrace religious practices as strong elements in their lives. However, just because the participants share the same religious categorization does not mean they all perceive or experience their religion the same way. Participants showed commitment to their religion in different ways and on different levels, sometimes resulting in conflicts, tensions or reconciliations, which are common to human beliefs, creeds and outlooks on the world. Yet despite the tendency for people to have varying opinions, the participants kept to one or all of the five pillars of Islam – declaration of faith, prayers, charity, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Practicing with others or by themselves, participants found many factors played a role in the process of religious formation and reformation during college.
In this study, interactions with other Muslims, especially women, led to a process of spiritual growth. Some indicated participation in the Muslim Student Association and attending Muslim campus events helped them ponder the implications of their faith. One participant attributed the opportunity to participate in haliqas as a major source of support during her explorations of ideas, values and beliefs. Interactions with peers who share the same beliefs allowed participants to become increasingly committed to integrating their religion into their daily lives. Yet, student groups, inherently by their nature, also provide opportunities for group and personal conflict. While the participants found a sense of belonging through their affiliation with the MSA, they sometimes faced contradictory religious interpretations and student life styles. Finding time to reflect on these differences was vital to their understanding of and commitment to their own religious beliefs. Regardless of the method, campus involvement allowed students to practice their religious values in an increasingly comfortable and self-reassuring manner.

As part of their core identity, religious salience, which encompasses ethnicity and gender, is reflected in the participants’ social and cultural role-defined realities. Identification with a single social identity versus multiple social identities was not as evident in the open-ended responses. Thus, religious identity is strongly linked to their overall sense of self. The participants showed the interrelatedness of their social identities by making religious meaning out of their experiences and interactions with others and creating synergy among the multiple aspects of their identity. Making meaning of social interactions and college experiences through a spiritual lens, the participants demonstrate a richer portrayal of
the risks and challenges of only considering one aspect of an individual’s identity (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). These risks and challenges are further illuminated when stereotypes exist for their social identities, specifically their social identification as Muslim.

Moreover, recognizing within-group differences makes certain social identities more or less salient resulting in participants finding themselves marginalized in both mainstream America as well as the Muslim community (McMurtrie, 2001). There is vast diversity within the Muslim population globally which is also reflected on the participants’ campus. On campus, there are many differences based on ethnicity, gender and even the way Islam is understood and practiced. Coming from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, the participants hold different cultural values and beliefs, as well as a wide variety of Muslim representations and realities. Different interpretations of Islam results in a disparity between men and women. Exposure to different attitudes about gender roles, the participants often find themselves restricted from interacting with members of the opposite sex (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994), regardless of personal preference.

Modesty in dress and manner is a distinctive expression of Islamic values for Muslim women. A fundamental element of the Islamic faith, the hijab or headscarf has many interpretations and many factors influencing the decision to wear it (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). The issue of the hijab is constantly debated in global society. For some Muslim women, they believe the hijab is part of and an expression of their religious identities and worldviews (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). While some believe wearing the hijab preserves dignity, honor, respect and safety, others feel it is not a mandatory aspect
of the Islamic faith. Of the seven participants, four wear the hijab and three do not. Some of the participants indicated the hijab is an act of submission to God, while others see the headscarf as a symbol of pure intentions. Just as there is great variety within the Muslim culture, there is diversity in the style, usage, and practice of wearing the hijab (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003).

Regardless of the interpretation, the four participants in this study that wear the headscarf believe it sends a message to others about what type of woman she is. With multiple meanings associated with the hijab, it is crucial to emphasize how Muslim women’s decision to wear the hijab can differ, depending on cultural norms. Some Muslim women experience social pressure to conform to the expectations of other Muslims. Sometimes responding to group norms, the participants of this study internalize others’ interpretations of the Qur’an and question whether or not they are following the words of God appropriately. Nevertheless, all participants interpret the hijab in regard to the surrounding society and the personal values they explored and discovered for themselves.

While stereotypes and bigotry are present throughout American society and directed towards individuals of all cultures, Muslim women who wear the hijab often face increased discrimination even within the Muslim community (Haddad, et al., 2006). For the participants of this study, personal meanings attached to the veil, such as religious and social interpretations and family expectations and cultural norms, influenced their decisions to wear it. These differences within the Muslim population may explain why some female Muslim
undergraduates participate in predominantly Muslim student organizations while others decide against religious based campus activities and affiliations.

Cultural, gender and religious differences can have a positive or negative affect on students’ educational experiences. Since the participants see their religious identity as their main social identification, they felt the failure of their campus community to understand Islamic practices merits the most attention. Recognizing the importance of maintaining healthy relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the participants draw upon their beliefs to educate their college community. Ironically, while the students have a desire to educate and reflect a positive Muslim identity to the campus community, this sometimes comes in conflict with their cultural and religious obligation to respect authority, especially in the classroom. Still, participants felt it was crucial for all Muslims on campus to maintain a positive self-perception to not only strengthen their own identity, but also to assert their identity in an effort to correct public misperceptions (McMurtrie, 2001; Peek, 2005a). In other words, rather than being passive, Muslims must actively combat inaccurate perceptions and stereotypes through their appearance, words and actions.

In spite of this proactive nature, female Muslims who wear religious garments still constantly deal with curious glances and questions. Since wearing the headscarf is not common practice in America, especially in a large college in the South, many of their peers base their opinions of Muslim women on images and misrepresentations they see in popular media. Speck (1997) suggested several possible solutions including recognizing misconceptions, becoming culturally alert, looking at the commonalities amongst religions
and cultures, seeking avenues to learn about Islam, not relying on media and textbooks for accurate interpretations of Islam and allowing Muslim students to present a variety of perspectives. The participants concur with these suggestions and often set a good example themselves by educating others when the time and place are appropriate.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), developing interpersonal competence is due to the amount of people a student meets throughout his or her college life, in and out of class and on and off campus. Thus, formal and informal student activities allow undergraduates to engage in the many facets of the micro- and macro-collegiate environment of a campus. While all seven participants are either active in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) or have been in the past, the majority expressed how beneficial the association can be for the development of identity. Group consciousness (Goffman, 1959) provided by the MSA and member solidarity allowed most participants to research and learn as much as possible about their religion. Aware that reality is an ongoing, dynamic process, the participants thought the MSA provided a safe, supportive environment to ask questions, reflect and debate personal interpretations.

Today, the female Muslim undergraduates continue to explore the many different interpretations of who they are and who they hope to become. Through social interactions, they actively participate in the creation of their perceived social reality (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). Filtering life’s experiences through their Islamic beliefs, they work towards making meaning of their collegiate world. Relishing the diversity of their college campus as well as seeking solidarity within the Muslim student community, participants navigate the
traditional college experience while understanding their own unique identities and contributions to the realm of higher education.

**Researcher’s Reflections**

The major focus of this phenomenological study was to understand the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of identity development during college from the participants’ point of view. Consistent with phenomenological methodology, I set aside my personal experiences, biases, and views and focused on the perspectives reported by the seven female Muslim undergraduates. Using a more personal, interactive mode of conducting research, I allowed participants to reflect on their lived experiences and speak for themselves, thus giving them voice.

Coming from different nationalities, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the participants speak many languages and practice an assortment of religious and cultural customs and traditions. The data show many factors contribute to identity development during college. As the participants explored their ethnicity, gender and religion, they had to manage differences, sometimes learning from others, but in most instances educating others about who they are and how they fit into American society. Using a religious interpretative lens to make meaning of social interactions and life experiences, these women cannot separate the multiple aspects of their identity. Ethnicity, gender, and religion mutually support each other and achieve equal salience in the students’ understandings of themselves.

As a result of participation in this study, all seven Muslim women spent time in reflection, rethinking their own personal meanings and finding new, deeper understanding in
their lives. With a strong desire to achieve a new identity for themselves, their campus and their collegiate world, the women openly participated in this study, sharing their hearts, thoughts and personal histories. Relishing the opportunity to express themselves, their culture, and their religion, they hoped to change others’ realities and perceptions about female Muslim undergraduate students. In a turbulent world where so much religious polarization has become a focal point of conflicting civilizations the courage of these students to take a stand and hope to make a difference by participating in this study was inspiring to the author. It is my sincerest hope to have done justice to their passion.

While the questions made one participant think about her answers, they also reaffirmed her identity. Never really giving much thought to her interactions with others, she said, “I’ve been interacting with people all the time. You just do it and when you talk about it, I guess you reflect on your interactions.” For another, the interviews gave her much to ponder. Besides reflecting on who she is and who she wants to become, she also thought about her interactions with others. “It keeps you alive. It keeps you observant of how you do interact with different people.” While a third student has introspective conversations with friends all the time, she indicated that this experience definitely helped her think about the way she acts. She shared, “I’m comfortable with non-Muslims more than Muslims. I don’t think that I necessarily changed the way I interact with people but it’s put a label on why I do the things I do.”

A sophomore who wears the hijab was very apprehensive about participating in the study. Having never given any thought about who she is, she feared she would not be able to
explain it clearly. She pointed out after the second interview she had a much more focused idea and was ready to continue to learn more about herself and her interactions with others. Another hijabbi also had a hard time trying to find the answers to some of the questions. Especially enjoying the identity map assignments, she verified, “I think I have a more clear idea of my identity, of who I am.” Aware she has been thinking about her interactions with various different groups for some time, she also admitted just answering the questions really helped her figure them out for herself.

Beautiful in its simplicity, one participant shared a basic thought, “I’ve learned a lot about myself. More than I would have expected probably.” Unaccustomed to reflecting on her identity or interactions with others, the interviews changed her attitude. “I’m beginning to understand what my role is as a person, as a human, as a Muslim, as a woman, as someone talking to a non-Muslim or talking to a Muslim.” Finding a new level of comfort with herself, she is no longer hesitant to talk about her identity. Gearing up to graduate, a senior stated the interviews did not change her, but they did make her think about her interactions with others. With a mainly consistent identity and presentation of self to the world, she indicated the interview process illuminated the need to be able to relate to people, which sometimes means making certain accommodations.

Appreciative for the good nature and frank honesty of the seven participants, I have gained a deeper, more meaningful understanding of how they view themselves and their place in our shared society. They welcomed me into their lives, sharing personal perspectives, stories, emotions, and memories to help illustrate their lived experiences with
identity development. With the many uncertainties and struggles they face today, and undoubtedly into their futures, it is no wonder they are strong and gracious young women. The college experience is sometimes deemed by pop culture as not the “real world.” As these students leave the college bubble they represent hope for all people to begin to value similarities as well as differences and to make a better world a reality. It is the author’s personal belief they will each make a great contribution to society within their families, their professions, their faith, and their communities.

**Implications**

The results of this study provide awareness about this female Muslim student population with implications for identity development theory and higher education practice. These insights resulted from the process of framing the study, collecting data and making meaning of the participants’ lived college experiences of identity development. With the changing demographics and cultural movement within the U.S. and a world that is growing smaller and smaller by the day, we find the college campus mirroring such dramatic and inevitable change. Thus, higher education theory and practice is at a crossroads. They must also change to reflect the heterogeneous nature of most student populations.

**Implications for Theory**

In examining the identity development of female Muslim undergraduates, questions arose regarding currently accepted theories of student development. Many psychosocial theories of identity development (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968) do not take into consideration the various different identities within social groups such
as ethnic, gender and religion. Holding a narrow view heavily based upon White male samples and leaving out the perspectives of other groups, these theorists generated universal theory, which led to higher education policy. In the current higher education landscape, these student development theories and practices may not be applicable to late adolescent Muslim women. While psychosocial identity development theories often include the need for adolescents to achieve autonomy and independence, each subculture has its own expectations. For example, female Muslims value family-oriented and patriarchal social structures. These cultural and religious influences also affect the way the participants interact with peers on a diverse college campus and made meaning of images, language and thought (Holland, et al., 1998; Vryan, et al., 2003).

Furthermore, it is important to note that early social identity development theory focused on single social groups and failed to incorporate differences between social groups (Fowler, 1981; Josselson, 1987, 2005; Marcia, 1966; Parks, 2000, 2005; Phinney, 1990, 1996). It is impossible to generalize these experiences and argue all women, Muslims or people of specific ethnic groups undergo the same identity development process. Rather than making assumptions that understanding ethnic, gender or religious identity in one group is sufficient in understanding the identity development process of all adolescents, there is critical importance to explore different student subpopulations. Moreover, the findings of this research provide further support that multiple aspects of identity may also be inseparable leaving these combined identities unexplored and unexamined not only in the student development literature but also in the individuals themselves.
An important aspect of this study is that it explored the interconnected aspects of female Muslim identity and examined how different social identities influenced ethnic, gender and religious identity development. Unable to separate out ethnicity, gender or religion from each other offered a new perspective by exploring and appreciating the interconnection of multiple identities on the way these women came to understand themselves. Looking at the relationships between gender identity and religious identity in female Muslims it was difficult to achieve mainstream society’s definition of these social identities, which are exacerbated when prejudice and stereotypes become obstacles to attaining personal ideals of womanhood or Muslimhood.

Moreover, the heterogeneous nature of this student population presents unique problems with participants’ sense of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) and validation (Rendon, 1994). How female Muslim students engage in various social groups and learn from being a member of these groups, changes their perceptions of their identity (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Holland, et al., 1998; Vryan, et al., 2003). However, unable to comfortably gain group membership within social groups based on single aspects of identity such as ethnicity or religion, these participants continually struggle to overcome social isolation, real or self-imposed, even within the Muslim community on campus.

For the study participants, exploring the interwoven aspects of their self concept was difficult because they were faced with a new way of exploring their identity, which they had previously taken for granted. Thus, it becomes increasingly important to reform concepts of identity in an effort to understand the whole person and the interconnected influences of
various aspects of self. Examining their holistic identity development brought forth the many competing social identities of the participants. The results illustrated that each social identity has an impact on ethnicity, gender and religion individually and the participants overall identity. The connection between identity development and meaning-making processes encourages further exploration of the intersectionality between different domains of identity (Abes, et al, 2007; Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007).

While the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) brings to light the ethnic, gender and religious identity salience of late adolescent female Muslim students, it does not address the interwoven nature of multiple aspects of identity for this student population. Since the multiple aspects of identity for female Muslim students do not occur independently of one another, theory must not only explain “what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, [and] how they come to perceive them as they do” (Abes, et al., 2007, p. 13), but also the relationship between combined social identities regardless if female Muslim students make ethnicity, gender or religion salient in their worldview. Moreover, consideration of the multiple combinations of social identities (e.g. female Muslim, Bosnian Muslim, or female Pakistani Muslim) and the infinite contextual and environmental factors affecting these students’ lives should allow for great variation within this student population. As identity is socially constructed, tensions exist within the world that female Muslims live in and real life experiences are variable. Thus, treating this population homogenously limits our understanding of the rich and diverse development of self definitions within this student
group and fails to reveal the ways in which late female Muslim students understand themselves and present their identity to others.

Just as Mead (1934) underscored the importance of social interactions in the developmental of varied self-concepts, identity multiplicity and intersectionality are critical for understanding individuals from multiple oppressed groups. Addressing the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, Dill et al. (2007) include both multiple identities and larger social structures of inequality in their interdisciplinary theory of Intersectionality. Focused on socially defined statuses, Intersectionality addresses situational factors that have the potential to impact privileged or oppressed identities, as well as the combination of both privileged and oppressed identity salience (Dill, et al., 2007). Since the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) lacks the complexity in understanding within-group differences, Intersectionality (Dill, et al., 2007) may expose how power operates in the diverse lives of female Muslim undergraduates and how it may shape their process of identity development.

**Implications for Practice**

The participants of this study and Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, et al., (2007) highlight the importance of considering identity across time and context. Although the Multiple Dimensional of Identity Model (Abes, et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) conceptualizes multiple ways of identifying with various social identities, it does not address how individuals manage conflict regarding these identities. As members of multiple oppressed social groups, the participants were conscious of the many intersections of their
ethnic, gender and religious identities. Thus, they pointed out applying the multiple
dimensions of identity framework might bring additional complexity to understanding their
process of identity development. Therefore, student affairs professionals should remain
sensitive to the interwoven nature of female Muslim identity when applying developmental
theories to these students.

While participants came from a variety of family backgrounds, their identity
formation occurs and reoccurs through their engagement with peers and the campus
community (Blumer, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Goffman, 1959). While participants
face conflicts during their journey of identity development, single theories of development
are not adequate in describing this population. Since identity is socially created through
interactions, overlapping multiple oppressed identities are part of understanding themselves
in relation to their peers, campus community, and society at large. In the context of higher
education, practitioners must consider the social construction of multiple oppressed identities
in relation to the campus social climate when designing a campus environment to foster
student growth and development.

A major goal of student affairs practitioners is to support all students in their ongoing
exploration of who they are and how they fit into the world around them. To accomplish this
goal, practitioners must assess student readiness and provide the appropriate balance of
challenges and supports (Sanford, 1966, 1967). Introducing students to new concepts and
people from different backgrounds within a safe environment may help challenge them to
explore diverse others while at the same time conceptualize or reconceptualize who they are.
Within this study, awareness and tensions among social identities and the combination of them emerged as prevalent and persistent patterns of student development. Since the members of this study are conscious of the many intersections of their ethnic, gender and religious identities, student advocacy in collaboration with a wide variety of female Muslims on campus will empower their identity construction and enable multiple expressions of self. Student affairs professionals need to go to the source. They need to seek out female Muslims from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as Islamic converts, on and off their campuses, to ensure proper attention to the needs of this diverse population when designing developmental programs.

Participants often have to manage differences and overcome conflicts of perceptions both in and out of the classroom. In some instances, participants choose to identify with one social category or move between any number of social categories. For example, some participants gain a sense of shared meanings based on ethnicity or common cultural values and customs while others find engagement with peers who share their faith gave them a sense of fit with the group. Social categories often provide a sense of belonging, which is important for students to gain a sense of self. Gaining insider status and membership in these groups, the participants had more access to shared experiences in student organizations and campus activities. Rather than making assumptions about female Muslim students, practitioners may want to focus on personal approaches, mediation, advisement, or counseling, to better understand the tensions that exist within this student population.
Fitting-in correlates with socially constructed groups of people and social structures (Holland, et al., 1998; Vryan, et al., 2003) and reference groups and immersion developmental stages (Phinney, 1996). However, friendships occur in groups of shared interest as well as between group situations. Failure to belong or rejection from peers may inhibit identity development, especially in the formative years of undergraduate studies. According to Skowron (2004), gaining a sense of being a part of the collective group identity has positive affects on students’ self-esteem. Additionally, diversity within the group presents unique opportunities for further learning and self-discovery. As a common component of many student life departments’ mission statements, diversity and inclusiveness must be at the forefront of student development professionals interactions with the groups they advise. For example, whether it is a student group solely based on faith activities and a relative homogeneous population like the MSA, or a larger student organization, such as a freshman orientation program where the female Muslim student population might only consist of a few members, the higher education mission will stay the same.

There are multiple countries of origin, languages, social classes, religious practices, and political views within the Muslim population (Afridi, 2001; Bilge & Aswad, 1996; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; Haddad, 2004; Haddad, et al., 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008; Suarez-Orozco, 2008). This diversity signifies the inappropriateness of treating female Muslim students as a monolithic group in higher education practice. Rather, to better serve Muslim students, faculty and student affairs staff need to increase awareness and knowledge about Islam and Muslim culture, as well as correct misperceptions and
provide the tools and skills for social justice. Through extensive reading, consulting with experts or cultural/religious scholars, and personal interactions with the female Muslim student population, higher education practitioners will increase their sensitivity to the nuances faced by this population and be better prepared to incorporate important cultural understandings into their interactions with diverse students. For example, male faculty members will have to be aware of the needs of this unique population. A closed-door meeting, one on one with a female student and male professor cannot ever occur.

Implementing policies endeavoring to deal with such an issue would involve many aspects of the college administration, such as human resources, legal counsel, risk management, and academic affairs to name a few. Such an example demonstrates the importance of having a safe, inclusive space on campus and policies to explore cultural heritages, gender roles and religious points of view.

Kuh, et al., (1991) suggest that involving colleges, or campuses that provide rich co-curricular learning experiences, promote the best environment for student learning and development. These campus environments include a healthy balance of challenges and supports (Sanford, 1966); many opportunities for student involvement (Astin, 1984), growth and spontaneous interactions; advantageous physical location and campus design; welcoming small community feel that contributes to students’ sense of psychological comfort; and clear student expectations consistent with the institution’s mission (Kuh, et al., 1991). Therefore, environments that allow students of multiple oppressed social identities to gain group membership and safely explore their identity are crucial to their healthy development.
As the number of Muslim females in higher education increases, welcoming campus climates will be of greater importance. Campus environments that present hostile climates will adversely influence academic achievement and psychological well-being (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Therefore, exposure to new and different ideas and a safe place to explore and reflect is vital to the healthy development of female Muslim undergraduates. While college administrations will struggle with everything from women-only gym hours to special Halal dietary needs and from physical and mental health providers to very stringent on-campus housing policies, it is vital that 21st century American colleges move in this forward thinking direction. While difficult to achieve, finding a space to belong in both the Muslim community and the greater student community is of the essence. This study speaks to the need for increased cross-cultural, interfaith, and intergroup dialogues among the student body, faculty, administrators, alumni, and the larger college community. Campus-wide discussions involving various cultural, gendered, and religious groups should occur to increase meaningful and productive group interactions, creative brainstorming and effective program development. Moreover, student affairs practitioners may want to develop student focus groups to assess developmental needs and willingness to participate in these intercultural dialogues and interventions.

Lee and Rice (2007) recommend institutions reject stereotypes and create environments that foster cross-cultural acceptance. While the hope is to see all diverse groups positively merge into the American higher education experience, it seems highly unlikely this will be accomplished in the near future. Therefore, it is imperative for colleges
and universities to do more to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Providing additional multicultural awareness, training and skill development for the entire campus community will prove beneficial. Incorporating cross-disciplinary outreach models and intervention techniques may allow practitioners to assist students in their self understanding and multicultural proficiency. Institutions of higher education need to respect the individual cultures represented within the total population (Eisenlohr, 1996). They must also understand within-group differences exist and not all students have the same upbringing, experiences or worldview. Critics urge colleges to be more receptive to racial and ethnic students and increase recruitment efforts, so the future leadership of America is more representative of the diverse assortment of individuals in its society (Keller, 2001). While the journey to understanding will take time, in addition to filling college campuses with diverse representation, it is essential to teach cultural and religious values and beliefs. More than tolerance we need acceptance, and without understanding, acceptance cannot be achieved (Afridi, 2001).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

With scant research on the Muslim population, this area warrants increased scholarly attention. Exploring issues such as 1) how within-group differences may affect sense of belonging, 2) how Islamic principles about male/female relationships may affect student engagement, 3) how Islamic practices such as prayer five times a day may interfere with course scheduling and campus activities, 4) how religious or cultural dietary needs may affect students’ sense of belonging due to limited cafeteria offerings, 5) how LBGТ
subgroups may be treated by other Muslim students, and 6) how information from studying identity development from other perspectives, such as Intersectionality (Dill, et al., 2007), can extend the findings of this study.

The findings showed Muslim women do go through a process of exploration and commitment as they negotiate their identity, relationships and experiences are influential, and they use a religious interpretative lens to make meaning of self and interactions with others. However, the current study did not explore whether this is a common occurrence or if the current study’s participants are unique student leaders within their demographic group. Therefore, researching students who do not participate, or feel discomfort in participating, in curricular and/or co-curricular activities could prove beneficial to gaining a greater awareness of their struggles with identity development. Moreover, conducting research on non-Sunni Muslims and converts to Islam will also provide further insights into this heterogeneous student population. By an in-depth interviewing of a wider variety of Muslim female students, future researchers can use a qualitative method to explore these students’ feelings associated with different identity development strategies and discover how they affect the students’ personal and collegiate lives.

In addition, a larger sample of Muslim women would provide a greater range of experiences with identity development during college. An expanded sample could also show a broader selection of the diversity of the Islamic community. Diverse perspectives could have illuminated various issues and provided a clearer picture of identity development and college social interactions. For longitudinal observations, studying participants as they first
enter college and then following up as they are about to graduate would be helpful to see the extent and progression of identity development throughout the college years. Of possible further interest would be the study of perspectives on the dynamics of the multiple dimensions of identity.

The current study included only one institution located in the Southeastern United States, so it is not representative of other national campuses or regions. Although Islam counts in its ranks more than a billion of the world’s population and is the fastest growing faith in this country, the research literature concerning Muslim Americans has remained inadequate. An additional recommendation emanating from the present study includes a replication of the current study with students in different regions of the country where Muslim populations vary. Because of the vast diversity within the Muslim population, it would prove beneficial to conduct similar studies on each group, focusing on their interpretations of Islamic principals and its affects on identity development, adjustment to college and student engagement.

The potential for future research also includes the investigation of the perceptions and experiences of other racial/ethnic students with Muslim females in class/activities to understand the complexity of all students’ experiences including students’ socialization process. Focusing on the experiences of professors who have Muslim females in their classrooms ought to be explored in order to understand their struggles and challenges regarding accommodating students who have different cultural and religious backgrounds. Looking at Muslim men and the issues they might face is also crucial to gaining a better
understanding of campus inclusiveness. According to one of the participants, Muslim men experience greater issues with identity development than Muslim women. Therefore, conducting a similar study with Muslim men may prove beneficial.

Finally, in general, little is known regarding the process of identity formation among Muslim Americans. No studies appear to have specifically documented and analyzed the ways that diverse forms of identity are constructed, developed, and enacted. Therefore, this area merits increased scholarly attention.

**Conclusion**

This research uncovered the lived college experiences of female Muslim undergraduates. The study suggests a combination of factors contribute to their identity development during college. These factors include exploring identity and arriving at a stable sense of self. The interactions students have with family members, peers, and other members of the campus community help motivate and guide identity negotiation. Institutions of higher education should encourage and support open dialogues. Allowing students to engage in diverse cultural experiences, both colleges and students can put aside differences and dispel misperceptions in order to step outside their comfort zone and embrace healthy cultural debate. Open dialogues will unify the campus community without any member having to align their opinions with the popular position. Diversity of viewpoints is healthy and adds to the overall educational value of an institution. Moreover, higher education professionals must consider the entirety of students’ lives – pre, during, and post college. All supports of the mission of higher education should intentionally foster awareness and sensitivity to
others; provide safe, inclusive campus environments; and to prepare students for engagement with a pluralistic society.
REFERENCES


McMurry, B. (2001, November 9). For many Muslim students, college is a balancing act: Campus life consists of frequent conflicts and occasional compromises with secular culture. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH
This consent form is valid May 19, 2009 through May 19, 2010
Title of Study: Muslim Undergraduate Women: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experience of Identity Development

Principal Investigator: Tori Cerbo
Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Joy Gaston Gallies

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
To gain a deeper understanding of the college experiences of traditional college age Muslim women and their interpretation of cross-cultural interactions and sense of self.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews in which you will answer interview questions pertaining to your perceptions of cross-cultural interactions with students, faculty and staff, your experiences with curricular and co-curricular activities; and your perceptions of self. The interviews will take place in a private, mutually agreed upon location. The interviews will last approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. You will be provided with a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to verify your statements. Audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research.

Risks
There is no foreseen physical, emotional, psychological, or economic risk. Some questions may cause momentary discomfort or unhappiness. You can refuse to answer any questions you perceive as embarrassing or threatening. Should you feel emotional distress at any time during your participation, please contact UNC Campus Health Services, James A. Taylor Building, Chapel Hill, NC 27599 or (919) 966-2281.

Benefits
The indirect benefit is the knowledge gained can benefit subjects, future generations and society by informing higher education practice.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely in the researcher’s office. All transcriptions will be on a computer which the researcher is the only one authorized to use. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. If individual quotations are used in reports, your identity will be protected by a pseudonym.

Compensation
You will not receive anything for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Tori Cerbo at 919-609-0247.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Subject’s signature ____________________________ Date ______________

Investigator’s signature ____________________________ Date ______________
APPENDIX B: APPROVAL LETTER FROM INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

From: Debra Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: June 9, 2009

Project Title: Muslim Undergraduate Women: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experience of Identity Development

IRB#: 993-09

Dear Ms. Cerbo:

The project listed above has been reviewed the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. This protocol expires on May 19, 2010, and will need continuing review before that date.

NOTE:
1. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.
4. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton
NCSU IRB
APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE FORM

Participant ID: ____________________

Demographics Questionnaire

Please tell me about yourself:

How old are you? ________________________________

What is your race/ethnicity? ________________________________

What is your birthplace? ________________________________

If not U.S., how long have you been in the country? ________________________________

What is your hometown? ________________________________

What generation college student are you?

☐ 1st to attend college       ☐ 2nd – parents attended college       ☐ 3rd – grandparents attended college       ☐ 4th or more

What year in school are you? ________________________________

What program/major are you enrolled in? ________________________________

Marital status? ________________________________

Please circle one: Sunni          Shiite
APPENDIX D:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Initial Interviews

Prior to the initial interview the Interviewer will distribute and receive the following from potential participants:
- Consent form
- Demographic Questionnaire

Sample Demographic Questionnaire

Please tell me about yourself?
- a. How old are you? ________________________________________________
- b. What is your race/ethnicity? ______________________________________
- c. What is your birthplace? __________________________________________
  - If not U.S., how long have you been in the country?____________________
- d. What is your hometown? __________________________________________
- e. What generation college student are you? _____________________________
- f. What year in school are you? _______________________________________
- g. What program/major are you enrolled in? _____________________________
- h. Martial Status ___________________________________________________

The Interviewer will bring the following to the initial interviews:
- Tape recorder
- Interview guide
- Copies of the signed consent forms
- Completed demographic questionnaire
- Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet
- Drawing materials
  - 8.5” x 11” white paper
  - color pencils with erasers
  - color markers
  - crayons

During the Initial Interview, the Interviewer will do the following:
- Greet participant
- Reintroduce topic briefly and explain interview procedures
- Answer any questions
- Provide participant with a copy of their informed consent
• Explain that some questions may cause momentary discomfort or unhappiness and participants can refuse to answer any questions they perceive as embarrassing or threatening.
• Explain that the interviewer is interested in hearing about their personal experiences.
• Inform participant that in order to preserve confidentiality, please refrain from disclosing their name or the names of friends, relatives, faculty members, or anyone else during the interview.
• Provide participant with the Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheet.
• Ask participant to plot their identities and complete the brief questionnaire asking about their personal attributes and characteristic that define who they are.
• Start tape
• Conduct interview
• Explain that participants will be asked to complete a drawing. Being as non-directive as possible, I will ask the participant to ‘Draw your self’ or answer the question ‘Who am I?’ I will assure them that they do not have to be an artist, that I simply ask them to do the best they can. Any image that they create is simply an expression of their feelings and thoughts about how they see themselves.
• Ask participant to ‘Draw your self’.
• At the end of the interview thank participant

Initial Interview potential questions include:

1. Identity refers to our sense of who we are, how we see ourselves, and how others see us. Thinking about that definition of identity, can you describe how you see yourself as a person?
   a. How much does your gender play a part in who you think you are as a person?
   b. How much does your religion/spirituality play a part in who you think you are as a person?
   c. How much does your ethnicity play a part in who you think you are as a person?

2. How important is religion or spirituality in your identity?
   a. Can you describe the process that led you to identify yourself as a Muslim?
   • What Islamic traditions and rituals are important to you?
   - Are there any that you have changed? If so, in what ways?
   • How do you feel about covering/wearing the hijab?
   - To what extent can a hijab stop you from doing anything you wish to do?

3. One way that some people define themselves is through their connections to others. To what extent do relationships define who you think you are as a person?
   a. Describe some significant experiences with members of your family?
b. Describe some significant experiences with friends?
c. Describe some significant experiences with members of the off-campus
   community?

4. Can you tell me about your experience as a Muslim woman at this institution?
   a. How do you see Muslim students treated on campus?
   b. Describe some significant experiences with your peers, faculty or other
      individuals on campus?
      • To what extent do you consider yourself active in campus life?
        – How do you see your involvement as contributing to your
          development?
   c. How do you see your experiences with cross-cultural interactions as they
      relate to your education?

5. Describe your perceptions and feelings regarding your current gender, religious and
   ethnic identity?

6. We’ve talked about identity as it relates to gender, ethnicity, religion/spirituality and
   relationships. Are there any other things that are central in forming your identity?

7. Do you have any additional thoughts about how gender, religion/spirituality, and
   ethnicity fit into your identity?

8. How do you think about a liberal education?
   a. Does your liberal arts education expose you to ideas that may not be in
      concert with your beliefs? Do you feel it conflicts with your religion?

Please note - Because of the exploratory nature of this study other questions may arise in the
context of the interview

**Follow up Interviews**

The Interviewer will bring the following to the follow-up interviews:
  • Tape recorder
  • Interview guide
  • Completed demographic questionnaire
  • Completed Multiple Dimensions of Identity worksheet
  • Personal Drawings

During the Follow-up Interview, the Interviewer will do the following:
  • Greet participant
  • Reintroduce topic briefly and explain interview procedures
• Answer any questions
• Remind the participant that some questions may cause momentary discomfort or unhappiness and participants can refuse to answer any questions they perceive as embarrassing or threatening.
• Remind the participant that the interviewer is interested in hearing about their personal experiences.
• Remind participant that in order to preserve confidentiality, please refrain from disclosing their name or the names of friends, relatives, faculty members, or anyone else during the interview.
• Provide participant with a copy of their completed Multiple Dimensions of Identity Worksheet and Personal Drawing.
• Start tape
• Conduct interview
• At the end of the interview thank participant

Follow-up Interview potential questions include:

1. Tell me about your drawing.

2. I would like you to reflect back on our first interview, tell me some more about …
   a. How you plotted your ethnic, gender and religious identities
      – What does it mean to be Muslim?
      – What does it mean to be a woman?
      – What does it mean to [ethnicity]?

3. Please answer the question “Who am I?”

4. Describe an experience in college which worked to define your:
   a. gender?
   b. religion?
   c. ethnicity?

5. Tell me about your first day at college:
   – What did you see?
   – How did you feel?
   – Where did you live?
   – What were classes like?
   – What did you do for fun?

6. Tell me about today:
   – What do you see?
- How do you feel?
- Where do you live?
- What are classes like?
- What do you do for fun?

7. Are there things that you changed about yourself as a result of your college experiences?

8. Has this interview experience made you think about your:
   a. Identities?
   b. Cross-cultural interactions?

9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The follow-up interview will provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect upon their initial interview and identity maps, as well as further elaborate on their self perceptions. This reflective process may elicit additional insights and information into the process of establishing identity, the main focus of this research.
APPENDIX E: MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY WORKSHEET

My Core (personal attributes & characteristics that define who you are)

Personal attributes/characteristics:

External Identities:

- Gender
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Race
- Class
- Sexual Orientation

Contextual Influences (explain how each has shaped your identity)

Family Background

Socio-cultural Conditions

Life Experiences

Career Planning/Decisions

Other
CONTEXT
Family Background
Sociocultural Conditions
Current Experiences
Career Decisions and Life Planning

CORE
Personal Attributes
Personal Characteristics
Personal Identity