

How to Decrease Islamophobia on U.S. Campuses? Implications for the Future of U.S.–Saudi Educational Exchanges

Keynote Speech presented at the People to People Association 5th Annual Conference

June 5, 2015 · Chicago

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Abstract

This paper summarizes and examines the impact of the cross-cultural relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Exchange programs for international education, such as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, are an excellent way to improve higher education for countries such as Saudi Arabia. This scholarship program is paid for by the Saudi government and allows students and their families to live in and pursue higher education in the United States. This exchange is bidirectional: Saudi students benefit from the opportunity to study and live in America, and the United States prospers culturally and financially. International education provides Saudi students with the skills to build relationships between people and communities as well as helps to foster cultural understanding between countries. This exchange is not without challenges. Many Saudi students experience problems adjusting to the new environment. Specifically,

they experience difficulties in interacting with American students due to language and communication barriers, as well as living arrangements and limited food choices. It is important that American colleges and universities make an effort to better welcome and incorporate Saudi students into their campus communities. The U.S. depends on these Saudi students to continue paying (through the scholarship program) to attend American colleges and universities. Their contributions greatly affect the U.S. economy. Additionally, Saudi students' presence on campus encourages cultural understanding and acceptance in communities. The conclusion of this paper is that the United States and Saudi Arabia both depend on each other.

Focus

Americans should do more to take advantage of the strategic opportunity for educational exchange through programs in international education; the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, established in 2005, is a case in point. As Saudi student enrollment continues to grow on American campuses (and in language centers), the need to understand Saudi students' experiences and their impact at the macro level is critical (Blanchard, 2014). The purpose of this presentation is to address the question "Why does the U.S. still need Saudi Arabia?" from the international higher education perspective. Here, are a number of pertinent research questions that may prompt our thinking in the relationship between international higher education in the United States and its impact on U.S.–Saudi relations: (1) What are the benefits for American universities from the influx of Saudi students to America since 2005? (2) What are some of the academic, social, and cultural challenges that Saudi Arabian students face at U.S. universities? (3) Do Saudi female students in the scholarship program have a dramatically different experience than the male students do? (4) How do Saudi Arabian students cope with academic, social, and cultural challenges while studying in the United States? (5) What should Americans do to enrich Saudi students' experiences in American universities, specifically, and in America, in general? (6) Will these Saudi students' attitudes about America change upon their return to the Kingdom after their completion of studies in America?

Introduction: The Surge of Saudi Students into the United States and the King Abdullah Scholarship Program

Saudi presence on American campuses has grown significantly over the past nine years (Anderson, 2014; Knickmeyer, 2012; Song, 2013). Saudis represent 6.1% of international students in the United States. In universities throughout the United States, there were 53,919 Saudi students in 2013–2014 and 44,566 in 2012–2013, which represents a 21% increase. Saudi students rank fourth in the number of international students in the United States (Open Doors, 2014; Open Doors Fact Sheet: Saudi Arabia, 2014).

The dramatic growth of Saudi students in the U.S. in recent years can be attributed to an educational agreement signed between former U.S. president George W. Bush and late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud in 2005 (Saudi Arabia Cultural

Mission to the U.S., 2012). The agreement is known as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). The mission of the scholarship program is “to prepare and qualify Saudi human resources in an effective manner so that they will be able to compete on an international level in the labor market and the different areas of scientific research, and thereby become an important source of supply of highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors” (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission to the U.S., 2012). The goals of the KASP include (1) sponsoring qualified Saudis for study in the best universities around the world; (2) bringing about a high level of academic and professional standards through the foreign scholarship program; (3) exchanging scientific, educational, and cultural experience with countries worldwide; (4) building up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment; and (5) raising and developing the level of professionalism among Saudis. The KASP allows Saudi students to apply for studies at both undergraduate and graduate (master and doctorate) levels and for medical (and dentistry) fellowships/residency studies in the United States. Their chosen academic disciplines include medicine, medical sciences (radiology, medical laboratories, medical technology, physical therapy), nursing, pharmacy, engineering (civil, architectural, electric, mechanical, industrial, chemical, environmental and communications, equipment and machinery, and more), computers (computer engineering, computer science, networks, and the like), pure sciences (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc.), health sciences, law, accounting, e-commerce, finance, insurance and marketing, and more (Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, 2010).

Services and benefits provided to KASP students during their study-abroad period include (1) monthly stipend for the student and his or her spouse and children, (2) full academic tuition, (3) medical and dental coverage, (4) annual round-trip tickets for the student and his or her family, and (5) academic supervision. In addition, qualifying students receive (1) rewards for high GPA, (2) a scientific materials allowance, (3) private tutoring fees, and (4) special needs allowances. The KASP also funds 12–8 months of language training. Dependents of students also receive the same benefits (Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia, 2010; Taylor & Albasri, 2014). No other country in the world offers better services and benefits for international students to pursue higher learning.

The KASP is perhaps the best investment by the Saudi government in human capital. It is apparent that King Abdullah understood that one of the key ways to modernize the country is through education and educational reform. In accordance with the vision of the KASP, “to prepare distinguished generations for a knowledge society built upon a knowledge based economy,” the KASP provides opportunities for training talented students in many fields, especially in science, engineering, and medical science. It is hoped that higher education in the United States and other advanced countries will provide Saudi Arabia with the education training needed by professionals to construct and reconstruct the nation. King Abdullah also understood that through international exchange programs, cross-cultural understanding between the host countries and the Kingdom can be promoted. King Abdullah’s successor, King Salman bin Al Saudi, has

carried on the legacy of educational reform in higher education. The KASP has now been extended to 2020.

Saudi Arabia is a country whose government is investing heavily in scholarships for international studies to develop a globally competent workforce (Institute of International Education, 2014). The United States is the most popular destination for Saudi students to study abroad under the government's scholarship program. There are several reasons why these students choose to study in the U.S., including recommendations from family members, the desire to be with relatives in the U.S., the prestige of American universities or the perceptions of the quality of education in America, the availability of the scholarship program, another family member receiving funding from the government, the student's major field of studies aligning with the options designated by the scholarships program, approval by the Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission(SACM), and recommendations by friends who have returned to Saudi Arabia after studying in the United States.

The Value of International Education for Saudi Arabian Students

Overall Impact of Studying and Living in America. “International education is crucial to building relationships between people and communities in the United States and around the world,” said Evan M. Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, at the 2014 Open Doors Report, Institute for International Education. Ryan continued to remark, “It is through these relationships that together we can solve global challenges like climate change, the spread of pandemic disease, and combating violent extremism” (Open Doors, 2014, p. 2; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rckS8AmMLJU>, 2014). Former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Smith addressed the importance of the scholarship program to KASP students in America and the United States' role in their education: “Their presence on our campuses has greatly increased mutual understanding and respect between our two countries. The role of international education cannot be ignored for national development.” Ryan (Open Doors, 2014) shared the same view, pointing out, “Only by engaging multiple perspectives within our societies can we all reap the numerous benefits of international education—increased global competence, self-awareness and resiliency, and the ability to compete in the 21st century economy.”

The impact of international education is multifold. At a commencement speech, former U.S. Ambassador James Smith highlighted the expectations that the U.S. had for Saudi students upon their return from their studies in the U.S.:

This massive influx of Saudi students is bound to have an impact when they return home. Indeed, this population is seen by many in the Kingdom as a positive force that will inevitably catalyze change in the conservative society. ... They have received a world-class education. As they now come home they will have the opportunity to shape the future development of the Kingdom and the future of the Saudi American friendship. (Smith, 2013)

The Saudi government also sees the value of international education for its youth:

Saudi Arabia is investing a quarter of its budget on education and training. It's building colleges and universities at home and sending thousands of young Saudis abroad for schooling. It needs to ensure they are gaining employable skills. ... If Saudi Arabia can get its education-employment-economy trajectory on the right path in the next half-decade, its long-term prospects—even in an unsteady region—are terrifically enhanced. (Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Al-Saud, 2013)

Fostering Cultural Understanding between Countries. A number of studies addressed how the overall impact of Saudi students' studying and living in America was positive. The participants from the two studies have reported that their experiences of living and studying in the United States, while challenging at first, were very beneficial (Heyn, 2013; Zhang, Fei & Lin, 2015). An earlier study by Al-Jasir (1993) also showed positive experience. Most students expressed that they had learned a lot about other people, themselves, and the United States. They had a deeper respect for other cultures and were more open-minded. Lastly, they expressed that they had acquired new skills. Scholarships for Saudi students to study at U.S. universities foster and build greater tolerance, understanding, and perspective not only between the United States and Saudi Arabia but also between the West and the Islamic world (LeBaron & Hausheer, 2013). As one student said, "I had misconceptions about America and Americans before I came here. The learning environment here is very safe. Also, I never thought I would make life-long friendships with Americans and international students from other countries" (Zhang, Fei & Lin, 2015).

Financial Gains for U.S. Colleges and Universities. The KASP also provides American colleges and universities (and language centers) with thousands of students who pay full tuition and whose expenses (tuition and fees, and living expenses such as housing, food, and transportation for themselves and their dependents) are covered entirely by the Saudi government. According to the Department of Commerce, international students brought \$22.7 billion in 2011 to American universities and colleges, and the 886,052 international students and their families at universities and colleges across the country supported 340,000 jobs and contributed 26.8 billion during the 2013-2014 academic year to the U.S. economy (Gazette, 2014; NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool; Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Saudi Arabian students in U.S. colleges and universities contributed at least \$1.3 to 3.2 billion to the U.S. economy in 2014 (Institute for International Education, 2014; Saudi Gazete, 2014). It is clear that the continuing influx of international students to the U.S. for higher education has a significant positive economic impact on the United States, and especially for many colleges and universities (Open Doors Data, 2014)). Farooq Al-Kateeb, a former professor of economics at the King Abdul Aziz University and a financial analyst, told Arab News, "Saudi students in the U.S. play a big role in reviving the U.S. universities which are currently facing a financial crisis" (Arab News, 2014).

According to NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool website:

Each year, NAFSA produces a detailed regional, state-by-state, and congressional district analysis on the economic benefits of spending by international students and their dependents to the U.S. economy. International students not only contribute economic value, they build bridges between the United States and other countries; bring global perspectives into U.S. classrooms and research labs; support U.S. innovation through science and engineering coursework, making it possible for U.S. colleges and universities to offer these courses to U.S. students; and support programming and services on campus for all students by paying out-of-state tuition, funded largely by non-U.S. sources. (NAFSA, 2015)

Imagine if those U.S. universities and colleges were to no longer receive funds from international students, especially Saudi students. How would their infrastructure and other operational budgets be affected?

To promote Social Change and Social Reform. A latent function of international education is cultural transmission, in which the modernization concept is often instilled in the minds of those international students who arrived in the U.S. from more conservative societies, including Saudi Arabia. The KASP has especially empowered Saudi women. Women comprise 24% of the Saudis studying in the United States. Several studies reveal that the scholarship program has had an interesting impact on Saudi family and gender relations. For example, Richard LeBaron, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and Stefanie A. Hausheer, a researcher on Gulf and Yemen, pointed out that “through the King Abdullah scholarship program, young Saudi women are seizing new opportunities. Saudi family dynamics are changing, and there is potential for the emergence of a new cadre of leaders in Saudi society” (LeBaron & Hausheer, 2013, p. 1). The late king opened doors for Saudi women by establishing Princess Noor University, the country’s first female-only university. This was a good testimony for Saudi Arabia’s education reform in higher education, especially for women’s education. Without good education for women, there is no way to discuss women’s status in society or breaking the glass ceiling in work organizations (Lin, 2015). Both female and male Saudi students often express that they have become more open-minded after studying abroad. Allowing women to study abroad is empowering. Most Saudi women who participated in the KASP considered themselves more independent and self-sufficient after their time in the United States. The present author has spoken to many Saudi female students. They have expressed their gratitude for their parents’ support and allowing them to study abroad. It is also interesting to note that many Saudi men said that they have changed their perceptions and values regarding Saudi women after living in the U.S. In fact, Saudi families allowing their daughters to study abroad is a mode of social change in Saudi society. It is a shifting of social norms. Because the KASP is only 10 years old, there is no hard evidence to show whether those who have studied abroad and returned to the Kingdom will be the movers and shakers in their society, but one can predict that higher education in the West will have a profound influence on the social reform movement in the Saudis’ home country.

Dr. Reneem Alselaimi, who was a recipient of the KASP, studied at Curtin Graduate School of Business in Australia. In her dissertation, "Increasing Saudi Women's Participation in Professional Occupations: A Saudi Perspective," she stated, "Saudi Arabia has seen extraordinary development through the last decade or so. Females are showing that, despite the misgivings of some, they are capable of handling both family and working responsibilities in various fields that were once male-dominated including law, business, and even industrial fields" (Alselaimi, 2014, p. 33). In an interview with the Washington, DC-based TV station KAS2 in 2011, Nouf Adi Al Sadig, an International Relations student at American University in Washington, DC, with the sponsorship from the KASP, expressed that she would return home and become a representative at the UN and wished to become an advocate for human rights. She said that studying in America had allowed her to better herself and learn how to better society back home.

Challenges

Resilience and Strength. It is clear that the large number of Saudi students in American colleges and universities in recent years represents an unprecedented opportunity for cross-cultural interaction. In general, Saudi students in America have expressed that Americans are friendlier and American communities are safer than they had thought (Anson, 2011; Heyn, 2013; Jammaz, 1972; Pinkerton, 2006). An overwhelming majority of the Saudi students felt that America's quality of education is higher than other countries'. Having said that, there are many outstanding Saudi students (for example, the recipients of the annual Awards for Saudi Students in the U.S.) in America who appreciate having chances to learn different cultures, different teaching styles, and different skills for handling classroom requirements. Saudi students have a high rate of acceptance into medical residency programs in the U.S. These medical doctors from Saudi Arabia appreciate the opportunities to participate in the most advanced medical training and evidence-based medical practice, and most of them plan to implement what they have learned in the U.S. into the Kingdom's medical system upon their return to the Kingdom.

Just like international students from many other countries, Saudi students have faced challenges from the moment they landed on American soil. How do Saudi students adjust, adapt, and survive in the very different living environment and very competitive academic fields? Some of the Saudi students' strengths and resilience that have led them to succeed include strong family bonds, support from peers, reliance on religion, support and service from the SACM, high motivation, resilience and intercultural competence, support from professors and teaching assistants, use of writing labs and tutors, and strong ties developed with other people from campus and community (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Hall, 2013; Shaw, 2009).

Recent studies show some negative perceptions about America prior to these students studying in the U.S. (Heyn, 2013; NAFSA, 2006). For example, students had concerns for their personal safety, of feeling unwelcome by Americans, about the high cost of higher education in America, and about the complexity and difficulties in the

American educational system, among others. It is understandable that some may have concerns about not been accepted by Americans.

Adjustment Problems. Saudi students in America experience many of the same adjustment problems and culture shocks as other international students (Charles-Tous-saint & Crowson, 2010; Harbi, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Jammaz, 1972; Long & Maisel, 2010; Poy-razli & Lopez, 2007). A few of these include cross-cultural adjustment (many campuses do not offer Halal food; food culture is closely related to religious practice, and since Islam is not a major religion in the U.S., finding Halal food on campuses may create a desire for Saudi students to want to live off campus); academic issues (language proficiency remains a major challenge for many Saudi students; Saudi students not accustomed to writing assignments required at American schools; American schools are more strict with tardiness and absenteeism than are Saudi schools); personal concerns (homesickness, loneliness, lack of social support networks, racial discrimination—real or imagined, interpersonal relationships, living arrangements, immigration regulations, financial issues, dealing with the guidelines and requirements for the scholarship program); health issues (depression headaches, sleep problems, anxiety, stress, cold weather, sickness, physical well-being, psychological distress), culture shock (differences in language, communication style, gender relations, religious practices.); and challenges with the new social environment in America (the issue of “voluntary isolation” by interacting and associating primarily with Saudi students and their family members).

What Should We Do to Enhance Saudi Students’ Positive Experience in the U.S.?

Saudi students enhance and strengthen campus diversity, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural exchange. Most of all, they have a profound economic impact on U.S. colleges, universities, and communities through the KASP. We must not only embrace Saudi students on our campuses but must also recognize the need to assist and enhance Saudi students’ positive experience in America. They will be the bridges and the cultural ambassadors upon their return to their home country. They will be the movers and shakers of Saudi society. These promising Saudi students will be an important brokerage for U.S.–Saudi relations. What should we and can we do to enhance Saudi students’ positive experience in America? We must work closely with the Saudi government agency (SACM) to offer thoughtful recommendations for improving the program with the goal of making the Kingdom’s human capital investment most successful.

Promote Cultural Understanding Exchange Events on Campus and in the Community. The success of international education is a two-way process. Both the host country and the international students must make efforts to understand each other’s cultures. With their ethnic and religious backgrounds so different from America’s, students must make extra efforts to encourage the notion of cultural relativism and to discourage ethnocentrism. Events and activities such as U.S.–Saudi Coffee Hour, Saudi Cultural Festival or Expo, Celebration of the Flags, Saudi Arabian Culture and Society

classes, observation of Saudi National Day, and American Host Family Program can be easily designed and implemented. NAFSA provides grants to help foster training in cross-cultural understanding. The program is geared toward training trainers. We need to have workshops to assist American teachers in understanding Saudi Arabia's educational system. In addition, more research on Saudi students' experience in America must be carried out with the goals of understanding the cultural context from the Saudi perspective, Saudi students' perceptions about America and Americans, gender roles and social norms in Saudi culture, and strengths and resilience of Saudi students in facing challenges and coping with new living and learning environments.

An orientation program upon students' arrival can be a very helpful tool for the students. The orientation may include discussion of the general social, cultural, and academic issues such as dealing with racism, campus safety, self-esteem, English language skills enhancement, independent living challenges, transportation needs, health care issues, and the like. Last but not least, providing a prayer room for Saudi students for their religious practice will be deeply appreciated by the students.

Create Academic Success Programs on Campus. Alongside international student partnership and transfer students' orientation programs, Saudi students need access to more academic support on campus. Although the KASP also includes a stipend for tutoring, students often struggle to find adequate assistance, especially with issues related to language proficiency. Universities can offer academic success programs on campus that may include a writing lab or an Academic Success Center to offer all kinds of academic support to students (i.e., tutorial programs, remedial and tutorial workshops to assist Saudi students in being better prepared for the American educational system, and information on how to take notes and tests, communicate with professors, and write term papers).

A social area that frustrates many international students is the insufficient interaction with American students. Programs must be designed to engage and blend American students in with Saudi students on campus. It is evident that integrating Saudi students and other international students with American students is one of the best ways to learn English and to understand each other's culture. Saudi students and other international students tend to voluntarily segregate themselves from the mainstream. Recommending Saudi students (and other international students) to live on campus might be a good starting point for better cultural and social integration.

In addition, a career service center may also assist students in preparing for career plans, job placement, and job-search preparation. Universities can work with KASP to set up specific career fairs and related workshops to assist Saudi graduates who are seeking employment in the Kingdom.

Connect International Alumni. An alumni association is an important organization to connect graduates with their alma mater. It is also a good source for networking among alumni in the job market and other social connections. American universities usually have an established alumni office that is often linked with the institutional advancement office. American universities should ensure long-term engagement and connections with Saudi alumni. Many universities in the U.S. today would have enough former

international students to form alumni associations. Such an association can build databases and networks that will keep connections with the graduates after they return to the Kingdom. It would be beneficial for alumni to receive newsletters about the development and success of their alma mater. Many private universities rely heavily on alumni donations and established endowments; therefore, the alumni association is multipurpose. Finally, establishing international partnerships through connections with alumni can be very instrumental. American universities should plan to send more administrators and faculty to visit their Saudi alumni. Building and sustaining long-term relationships with alumni will foster even stronger ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

From educational, cultural, social, and economic angles, U.S. higher education institutions should continue to working closely with the SACM and KASP. The KASP has proven to be an effective way to enhance mutual cultural understanding between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. It also has provided one of the best means for the Kingdom to educate its promising and talented youths in many different fields. Last but not least, American universities and colleges have benefited from the program's enormous economic contributions. Yes, from the higher education perspective, the U.S. still needs Saudi Arabia, and vice versa. Thank You

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