

## Saudi Arabian International Students' Sense of Belonging at an HBCU

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*A multi-participant descriptive case study approach was used to highlight how Saudi Arabian international doctoral students attending an HBCU perceive their sense of belonging and how contextual factors impact their sense of belonging. Data was collected from students enrolled at Umoja University (pseudonym), a mid-sized HBCU in the south. At Umoja University, approximately five percent of the total student population is comprised of international students, the majority originating from Saudi Arabia. This research study was framed using the theoretical concept of 'sense of belonging'. The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of Saudi Arabian international students and the ways that their experiences influence their sense of belonging at an HBCU. This research explores how institutional structures, campus climate, and participants' internal issues help or hinder these students' sense of belonging. The findings suggest that external factors like national politics, faculty, staff, and peers contribute to a sense of belonging or lack thereof. In addition, internal factors such as language proficiency, cultural, political, and religious issues also play a role. The findings of this study have implications for university personnel as well as students considering HBCUs as an educational option.*

*Keywords:* sense of belonging, Saudi Arabian, international students, HBCU

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are well-known for providing an educational experience that allows access to positive campus environments (Allen & Epps, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Stewart et al., 2008), a nurturing faculty (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Shaw et al., 2012), and inclusion in the curriculum (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Ginwright, 2004), particularly for Black students. Evidence of engagement at HBCUs and other minority serving institutions indicate that students may be provided more support overall than their counterparts who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bridges et al., 2008). This is not surprising since HBCUs were founded on the premise of providing inclusive and affirming educational environments for Black students during a time when these students were not allowed access to higher education at PWIs.

Since their origination, HBCUs have provided access to diverse populations outside of the African American community. Almost 40 percent of students enrolled at HBCUs now identify as non-black (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman, 2013). In recent years, HBCUs have come to recognize the increasing significance of the global nature of our society in ways that have prompted a closer look at how the campuses are engaged in internationalization efforts, prepare native-born African American students to be effective within the global society, recruit international students, and create environments that are conducive to creating communities so that historically minoritized students feel a sense of belonging.

International students from Saudi Arabia have been involved in these internationalization efforts. During the 2013-2014 academic year, Saudi Arabia was the fourth largest country to send students to the United States. This population numbered 53,919 students, which was a 20 percent increase from the previous academic year (Loo, 2015). The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) has been extended to 2020, therefore the growth of Saudi Arabian students in the United States (U.S.) will likely continue. Although we know the number of students admitted to the U.S. to study, little is known about where Saudi Arabian students study within the United States. An analysis of World Educational Services (WES) applicant data along with national data

can provide insights into what types of institutions Saudi Arabian students attend. An analysis of the international populations at all institutions show that a diverse and sometimes surprising set of institutions have seen significant growth in their Saudi Arabian student population. Five of the top 25 institutions to which WES Saudi applicants reported attending in 2014 were HBCUs. National data also reveal that Saudi Arabia is the top country of origin among international students at HBCUs, though these institutions have often struggled to attract international students. Many HBCUs have developed partnerships with institutions in Saudi Arabia, as is the case for Morgan State University in Baltimore. These partnerships have largely been an outgrowth of growing domestic competition for students, coupled with the desire to internationalize, which has led many HBCUs to seek enrollment from abroad (Loo, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Saudi Muslim international doctoral students and influences on their sense of belonging at an HBCU. This research explores how institutional structures and campus climate help or hinder these students' sense of belonging. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- (a) What are the experiences of doctoral-level Saudi international students at an HBCU?
- (b) In what ways do these experiences contribute to their sense of belonging in the HBCU context?

### **Literature Review**

This paper is framed using the theoretical concept of *sense of belonging*. Within this conceptualization, we present literature that examines sense of belonging among students of color and international students.

#### ***Defining Sense of Belonging***

Higher education scholars have developed a large body of research examining how students experience a sense of belonging and the factors impacting sense of belonging, leading to a number of definitions of the term (Strayhorn, 2012). However, for the purpose of this study, the researchers use the definition as advanced by Mwangi (2016) and Hurtado and Carter (1997), which "suggests sense of belonging is an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to the college community that reflects upon the individual's mood, emotions, and attitude" (Mwangi, 2016, p. 1017). This definition considers both cognitive and affective factors impacting students' experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Retention and persistence are often emphasized in research focused on sense of belonging in higher education contexts. For example, in his seminal research on student attrition, Tinto (1993) suggested that students' level of integration into a university's academic and social systems, perceived shared values with the institution, and commitment to the institution reflects a sense of belonging and "fit" within the campus environment. Students are at greatest risk of attrition if they perceive a lack of fit "with the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (Tinto, 1993, p. 50) or if they are "unable to establish...personal bonds that are the basis for membership in the communities of the institution" (p. 56). Conversely, higher levels of sense of belonging or "fit" increase the likelihood of student satisfaction and persistence at the institution (Mwangi, 2016).

#### ***The Influence of Peers and Faculty***

Since Tinto's early work, contemporary researchers have concluded that students' sense of belonging is highly influenced by perceived rapport from peers and faculty (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, Salomone, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008; Thomas, 2014). Meaningful interpersonal relationships, systems of support and resources, and feelings of being accepted and

valued, have all been cited as integral to sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). Extant research provides a wealth of evidence that an increased sense of belonging in college is associated with positive psychological, academic, and persistence outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012).

### ***Students of Color and Sense of Belonging***

Scholars have engaged in research focusing specifically on sense of belonging for students of color, the results of which suggest that hostile campus racial climates are associated with lesser sense of belonging and interactions with peers, as well as lower rates of persistence and degree attainment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Santos et al., 2007). Interactions with peers from different racial/ethnic groups also impact perceptions of racial climate and subsequently affect students' sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 1999). Positive cross-racial/ethnic interactions often result in greater openness to diversity as well as gains in critical thinking and academic engagement for both White students and students of color (Milem, 2003; Whitt et al., 2001). Research illustrates that students of color often engage across racial difference in developing peer groups (Antonio, 2001). In their study on interracial interaction in college, Hurtado, Dey, and Trevino (1994) found that students of color were more likely than White students to interact across race and the interracial interaction for Black students was most often related to social activities. Additionally, Maramba and Velasquez (2012) found that increased learning about one's racial/ethnic group had a considerable positive impact on Students' of Color sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships with other racial/ethnic groups.

### ***International Students and Sense of Belonging***

Research on international students often focuses on psychosocial factors (psychological well-being, homesickness, loss of identity) and sociocultural factors (cultural norms, intercultural contact, communication) related to the adjustment process (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Ward et al., 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Belongingness has only recently been extended to studies on international student adjustment. For example, Glass and Westmont-Campbell's (2014) quantitative study found that sense of belonging increased cross-cultural interaction between international and host country students and enhanced international students' academic performance. Additionally, the researchers found that discriminatory experiences had a negative impact on belongingness among these students, while participation in co-curricular activities had a positive effect (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014). However, the students sampled were from PWIs and only seven percent of the sample identified racially as Black. Several scholars conclude that to effectively engage with the campus community, it is important that international students interact regularly with native peers and professors (Glass et al., 2015; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ying & Han, 2006). Conversely, Ward and her colleagues (2001) suggest that it is important for international students to have a peer network of other international students, which can provide mutual support and understanding as well as alleviate homesickness (Ward et al., 2001). The research suggests that international students adjust more positively if they have social networks comprised of relationships with other international students (unicultural or multicultural networks) as well as with native students, staff, and faculty (bicultural networks) (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Lin & Yi, 1997). When international students are not able to achieve a sense of belonging in their campus environment, outcomes can include anxiety, hostility, lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal, and depression (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Extant literature illustrates the experiences of non-Black populations, particularly White students, faculty, and staff at HBCUs (Conrad et al., 1997; Jackson & Daniels, 2005; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). There is an abundance of research regarding international students who study at predominately white institutions (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Ward et al., 2001; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). However, very little is known about the experiences of international students who study at minority serving institutions – specifically, HBCUs. Mwangi (2016) is one of few recent studies that highlight the experience of Black immigrant students at HBCUs. However, at the time of this article, there were no current studies that explored the experiences of international students from the Middle East.

Saudi Arabian students often apply to a wider range of schools other than the elite institutions that are a typical focus of international applicants. Nearly 40 percent of Saudi students have solid financial resources but lower academic preparedness, as shown by their high enrollment in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) prior to starting full degree programs. At over 38,000 students in 2013-14, Saudi Arabia was the leading country of origin for IEPs in the U.S., supplying roughly 30 percent of all students to these programs. These students are also more interested in the experiential aspects of a U.S. education and less likely to focus on the top-ranked institutions favored by prospective Chinese students. World Education Services (WES) data confirm that only six of the top 25 institutions to which Saudi applicants sent WES evaluation reports were in the top national rankings of the 2014 *U.S. News & World Report*, with only two of them in the top 100 (Loo, 2015).

Five of the top 25 institutions to which WES Saudi applicants sent reports in 2014 were HBCUs (Loo, 2015). National data also show Saudi Arabia as the top country of origin among international students at HBCUs, though these institutions have often struggled to attract international students. Many have developed partnerships with institutions in Saudi Arabia, as is the case for Morgan State University in Baltimore and Tennessee State University in Nashville. These partnerships have largely been an outgrowth of growing domestic competition for students, coupled with the desire to internationalize, which has led many HBCUs to seek enrollment from abroad.

Scholars have examined sense of belonging among international students highlighting the ways in which factors such as cross-cultural interactions (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), engagement with faculty (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), self-identity (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012), and peer groups contribute to sense of belonging (Ward et al., 2001). However, there is paucity in research that explores the experiences of Saudi international doctoral students at HBCUs. The current study addresses this gap in the literature.

### **Methodology**

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) suggests that qualitative researchers seek to make sense of a phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, while Yin (1994) asserts that case studies are especially well-suited to contextualize conditions. As such, the researchers utilized a multi-participant descriptive case study approach, given our interest in how Saudi international students attending an HBCU perceive their sense of belonging and how contextual conditions impact their sense of belonging. Using case study, as described by Yin (1994), allowed for an examination of participants' in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009) as Saudi Arabian international students matriculating at a HBCU.

### **Participants**

Data were collected from students enrolled at Umoja University (pseudonym), a mid-sized HBCU in the south, where approximately 14 percent of the student population is comprised of international students, the majority originating from Saudi Arabia. Moreover, of the 14 percent international population ( $n = 562$ ), 74 percent ( $n = 417$ ) were from Saudi Arabia. Five doctoral students participated in this study (see Table 1). Each of the participants self-identified as international students who are nationals of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Characteristics*

Name/Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Year
Lone	Male	Curriculum & Instruction	4
Shanda	Male	Curriculum & Instruction	4
Jahi	Male	Curriculum & Instruction	4
Wazi	Male	Curriculum & Instruction	4
Hiaf	Male	Curriculum & Instruction	4

### Data Collection

This study employed purposeful qualitative sampling, which is the greatest way to select participants or sites that will help to know the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2014). Due to one of the researchers residing in an area where there is a large, Saudi Arabian student population, it made both recruitment and data collection convenient for participants and the researchers. Participants were asked to choose pseudonyms. This proved to be an effective way to provide participants ownership and build rapport during the interview and in subsequent discussions.

The study consisted of two parts. Part I was a short survey that took approximately 5-10 minutes. Part II consisted of an interview that took approximately 20 minutes. Students who participated in the survey were not required to participate in the interview. Students who chose to participate in the follow-up interviews were contacted in a separate email. In considering a limitation of the study, the fact that only males chose to participate in this study, it is important to note that Saudi international male students significantly outnumber that of female Saudi students at the focal institution and others within the U.S. In addition, the first researcher is a Muslim male international student. Due to religious and cultural norms regarding gender, this may have dissuaded female Saudi students from participating in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a place fitting to participants. The interview length on average was approximately 25 minutes. Field notes and memos were also collected to add contextual meaning to data collected from participants. Qualitative open-ended questions focused on participants' experiences at an HBCU and their sense of belonging or lack thereof. According to Creswell (2014), "qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that the participants can share their views" (p. 9). One-on-one interviewing was used to get direct information. This process was implanted within a sequence of phases: selecting the interviewing questions that will be asked to the participants and proper recording procedures (Creswell, 2013). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed manually. The transcripts assisted as the key sources of information for a content breakdown.

### Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis occurred in three stages throughout this project, using Merriam's (2009) constant comparative method of case study analysis. All of the data were coded manually by the researchers and compared throughout the process. We first engaged in multiple reads and

comparative examinations of the data (Creswell, 2008). Through this process we engaged in open coding and inductive coding to get a sense of participants' transition to university in the U.S., their perceptions of their collegiate experiences, and the impact of their social identities on their college experience. While the researchers were aware of concepts from the conceptual framework and sense of belonging literature prior to data collection, an inductive approach was adopted allowing the researchers to remain open to new and emerging themes throughout the course of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). Some codes matched concepts from the literature and others were developed in-vivo from comments made by participants.

The researchers next engaged in member checking to increase the trustworthiness of their initial coding scheme (Krefting, 1999). Member checking involves testing the interpretations of the data we developed with the research participants (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each researcher conducted formal member checking with the students as a follow up to their interview. During the coding process, we also depended on interrater reliability. Once both researchers agreed on the codes, we refined the coding system before moving into further analysis. Both during our initial coding process and after initial codes were developed, we engaged in comparing and connecting emerging codes and categories (Merriam, 2009). We then grouped together data by code in order to reassemble the data and view patterns and themes within and across the narratives. Through this process and comparing across the different narratives, we refined our coding system, reduced the number of original codes, and connected the remaining to larger categories. Lastly, we began to pull together themes and develop storylines (Merriam, 2009). During this process, the three primary themes that emerged across the data were 1) cultural and religious issues, 2) language proficiency and belonging, 3) HBCU faculty, staff, and sense of belonging, and 4) HBCU peers and sense of belonging.

In addition to member checking and interrater reliability, we used reflexivity to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of our data. Reflexivity served a variety of purposes in our research. It aligns with our epistemological position and methodological approach (social constructivism), which requires the researcher's "self" to be present in the study (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, reflexivity provides another form of credibility and trustworthiness to research data because it allows researchers to be conscious of how their background can influence how they collect and interpret data (Krefting, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researchers primarily engaged in reflexivity through memo writing, in which we would include our own personal reflections. We processed reflexivity by reflecting on our researcher identities, considering the researcher/ participant relationship, and reflecting on our social positionings (Krefting, 1999).

In some ways, both researchers have insider/outsider identities that influence the ways in which we may have interpreted the narratives of the study participants. Though not of Saudi descent, the first author is a Muslim, male, international student who shares both a language (Arabic) and religious beliefs (Islam) with the participants. It is possible that his identities and experiences helped him to more quickly build rapport with students in recruiting and conducting interviews. Yet, it was also important to approach this study knowing that participants would have experiences that would differ from his own. Keeping this at the forefront was the fact that he was an outsider because he does not share the same national or cultural identity as the participants. While his identity provided a level of distance from the participants that helped keep their narratives at the center, it was also a challenge because he did not have personal experiences with the HBCU context and had to learn that context through the process of this research study.

The second author is a U.S. born, Black American, Christian, female. Before pursuing graduate degrees at two predominately White institutions, she attended an HBCU as an

undergrad and is now faculty at a medium sized HBCU. Her familiarity with the HBCU context and outsider identity provided a level of distance from the participants that helped keep their narratives at the center. Both researchers' insider/ outsider identities shaped the research design and interpretations; thus, efforts to ensure trustworthiness based on these factors allowed us to remain aware of how our experiences, identities, and ideologies might influence our work.

### Findings

The emerging themes from interview data suggest that external factors like national politics, faculty, staff, and peers contribute to a sense of belonging or lack thereof. In addition, internal factors such as language proficiency, cultural, political, religious issues also play a role. In the following, participants' voices are illuminated to provide insight into their experiences and sense of belonging as they pursue an education in an HBCU context.

### Cultural and Religious Issues

Overall, the Muslim Saudi students felt an overwhelming sense of belonging on the campus of Umoja University. Waze stated, "I had a lot of American friends, either White or Black and I have a lot of international student friends so it's been good actually." Jahi explained that overall, the campus has been supportive of his identities and inclusive of his religion. He stated "I think that [national politics] doesn't affect any of my status as international student for being Muslim. I have no experience of somebody bothering me or do not allow me to pray." Campus activities that highlighted the various ethnic and cultural groups on campus also helped to create a sense of belonging and community for these students. Haif recalled the time when we "did that festival at the gym in the main campus when we every country [shared] their customs, traditions, and like culture with everyone else. This is a time that I feel like part of the campus community."

While Muslim Saudi students generally found a welcoming environment on campus, it did not shield them from xenophobic attitudes in the communities in which they lived. Shanda explained that

before the [2016 presidential] election there was so many racism going on particularly with my wife because my wife wear a scarf, and we felt that some people, they were so happy that Trump would be elected, so they can get rid of us because [they felt that] we are so dangerous.

The students also acknowledged the impact of the media in fostering ideologies regarding the Muslim population in general. Lone stated that the

media plays big role in the world on people think that all Arabic or all Muslims, [we] shouldn't be hated based on the media and what's has been showing in the media; so, people to get like a little afraid from you in the street.

He further suggested that "we need to deal as humans...far away from our colors, uh or background or ethnicity or gender."

As Muslims, this group of international students is in the religious minority. While this should not be an issue at a public institution, one Saudi Muslim student complained about the lack of religious accommodations. He explained that a group of Muslim students had asked many times for a designated prayer space. When the request was not honored, Haif said, "I didn't feel comfortable with the university didn't like even a small space for us like even like a mini room for Muslims to pray at or even like doing like a chamber for every religion." Haif said, "We were like the last two years asking them about it and we ended up praying like downstairs or any corner or any like uh lecture room that is open." He contends that the group will continue to advocate for a designated prayer space.

### Language Proficiency and Belonging

In addition to cultural adjustments and the ensuing political climate regarding religious diversity, the Saudi students in this study suggested that language proficiency was the greatest factor in their ability to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Although these students all met the language proficiency requirements set by the University, they still struggled with the level and amount of academic English necessary to be successful at the doctoral level. Hiaf supports this in his assertion that

the language itself is like the greatest challenge and everything that comes with this language like reading, comprehending sentences, full texts, writing and also the grammar. We are faced with this great challenge like doing it and then editing once and twice and three times... every time.

Lone explained “English is not our like mother tongues, but uh sometime uh we need more time to...do our work or sometime we need like to redo our work. So, we need to from the professors to understand that point.” It is also important to point out that while academic language is a barrier to academic success, the lack of social language for some of these students hindered their ability to contribute to social interactions conducive for creating a sense of belonging. Shanda stated that he “felt stupid so many times because so many people talk to me and I have no idea what they are saying to me.”

### HBCU Faculty, Staff, and Sense of Belonging

#### *Faculty Support and Respect*

Faculty support was another factor in these students’ sense of belonging on this campus. Mazi said,

anytime I spend with my professors actually I feel, ah [...] included. I feel that I am being helped, supported and I have a great chairman for my dissertation and she has been my advisor since I started at TSU. My professors are really respectful.

Shanda explained how his faculty advisor supported him when there was a delay with his visa, “When I was overseas, my visa got delay at the U.S embassy. My advisor collaborated with me and helped me to register for classes even though I came late. I came three weeks after the semester started.” He also highlighted that faculty “support [international] students trying to publish some of our work as graduate students, which I think is very good idea to do beside my study and degree.” Also, Shanda said his college

has great professors, some of the professors here are so-so great. They have very-very broad experience, if you take a class with someone who taught for fifty years and they teach the difference between now and fifty years. You really learn something. They really-really challenge you.

Faculties at the college give encouragement to their students to participate in a conference, Shanda articulated, “female professor that was one of the best classes for me because the next year, we- we presented at a conference, what we have done in that class.” The faculty gives support beyond classroom walls, Lone said,

three professors in my departments who were like very supportive, try to help me and trying to help me and still try to helping me overcoming my issues, difficulties even within the writing, even within the thoughts, even within the proposal for the research, with my ah-ah qualifying exam and comprehensive exam.

Hiaf expressed his wonderful experience with one of his professors, he declared, “the only way that I could-like think is the contact Dr. ... at the International Office, I told her what-what happened. Exactly and within two days, I received my friend’s [letter of] acceptance.”



### ***Staff Issues: Miscommunication and Disorganization***

Most of their sentiments toward faculty were positive. However, there was obvious discontent with university staff. One student, Shanda, succinctly pointed out that the university “is not welcoming to international students, and I mean by that particularly those employees around the office.” The student shared an experience that may have influenced this belief. He had called an office to explain that he would need to place a request to extend his time and postpone his graduation for a semester or two, due to some unexpected delays. He stated that the staff responded “so you are telling me that you wanna stay in the United States!” Shanda stated, “I don’t know how he came up with that conclusion. Because maybe he misunderstood what I meant...maybe my language didn’t help me.” Wazi also expressed that “some bad situations with the graduate office sometimes they do not answer my emails or messages, it takes them so long to [...] um response to my uh emails um. I try sometimes to call them no answers.”

Lone shared his level of dissatisfaction with what he perceived to be the lack of encouragement and support on a poster presentation at the campus. He said,

My first academic work was on a banner in TSU and uh it was uh me and another international student. So we were two students, international students, that’s how they must give us as credit based on what we have done, but unfortunately we didn’t get anything like back.

But Wazi reported, “They [professors] helped us with everything we need, whenever we ask about everything they gave us the right and answers and they guided us to do what we were supposed to do.” Other participants complained that important documents weren’t signed by university officials in a timely manner. Shanda stated, “If I show up and ask, uh please I need my transcript, without any respect- without any respect, they might say go home and send us an email.” Wazi strongly stated,

I have had -- like as I told you -- problems with the graduate office. Sometimes they don’t give us the attention that we need especially we are doctoral students and sometimes the record office, sometimes I feel like they disrespect us sometimes.

### **HBCU Peers and Sense of Belonging**

The participants are doctoral students who do not reside on campus, so they are not engaged in many student affairs activities. Hiaf explained, “most of the time I am traveling don’t spend much time at the campus.” However, levels of socialization with domestic peers have influenced Saudi students’ sense of belonging to their university. As aforementioned, the lack of proficiency in social English hindered some Saudi students’ ability to contribute to social interactions conducive to creating a sense of belonging. When discussing relationships with U.S. American peers, Lone explained, “I don’t know, but sometimes we need to have that kind of relationship like the flexible relationship...and we need that kind of human being dealing with us.” The participants had mixed thoughts about building friendships with peers and the role of these relationships. Shanda said,

...American friends, they say “yes,” we want to be a friend with you, but they will never answer your text message, they will never answer your call, they will never show up, they [...] will forget you easily, and in general I noticed that Americans doesn’t like to socialize, doesn’t like to have a friend.

Conversely, Hiaf found his peers beneficial to his success. He said “I was working with my colleagues. They were like much useful as...when I was taking the statistics classes which is like totally different from my background and they would like simplify things to me as much as they could”. For writing assignments, some Saudi students ask their domestic peers for help.

“Sometimes I shared [asked] college-colleagues, please look at my paper. I ask how do you say this in English? Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. It depends,” said Shanda.

With regard to getting to know their peers, Saudi students were extremely concerned of the impact that the media had on how they were perceived by their peers. Jahi stated that “the media also try to feed the people minds and attitude ah in negative things about ah Muslims people and Islamic community inside the United States, it is really difficult.” Jahi further explained that “they act like we are strange from the community for the students like the majority of the students are from black race background.”

### Conclusion

This research study was guided by the following questions: (a) What are the experiences of doctoral-level Saudi international students at an HBCU and (b) In what ways do these experiences contribute to their sense of belonging at an HBCU? In the previous section, themes regarding participants' lived experiences at an HBCU were presented. At this point, we acknowledge that this study is not without limitations. The study does not represent the entirety of the Saudi population and due to the methodological approach, it is not generalizable. Nevertheless, the study has inherent value. In this section, we briefly discuss the findings as possible answers to the research questions. We conclude with implications for both HBCUs and international students who are interested in studying in the United States.

Based on the findings of the study, doctoral-level Saudi students perceived that they experienced both isolation and cultural insensitivities in the HBCU setting. These experiences led to feelings of isolation. Many of these experiences were the result of external factors, such as the institutional and federal guidelines/policies, staff, or faculty. For example, participants mentioned discord with staff members, lack of accommodations for religious needs, and lack of support or academic language difficulties. Some experiences that led to isolation were also internal, as they were based on the participants' beliefs, actions or abilities. For example, participants reported language proficiency being a major barrier to communicating with faculty, staff, and peers. It might be because of miscommunications due to lack of proficiency in English that there were delays in the completion of paperwork leading to feelings of disrespect and isolation for some participants. The participants also suggested that living away from campus most likely contributed to a sense of isolation from the greater campus community.

While there were factors that led to a sense of isolation, doctoral-level Saudi students also perceived that the HBCU setting was conducive to a positive sense of belonging in several ways. First, they reported that for the most part, faculty members respected them and welcomed them in ways that made them feel a part of the community. When one student was on vacation in his country, his visa was expired and he applied for renewing the visa, but his visa was not received on the timely basis at the U.S embassy in Saudi Arabia. His professor helped him to register for classes even though he was late. The literature indicates that evidence of faculty engagement with international students at HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions might provide more support overall than their counterparts who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Bridges et al., 2008). Faculty members' interest in the success and experiences of these students may be critical to their feeling of belonging to their programs and success. Second, participants reported that interactions with their domestic peers were mostly positive. They enjoyed the sense of support that peers provided, and they did not feel ostracized based on their racial, ethnic, or religious identities. Glass and Westmont-Campbell's (2014) assertion that sense of belonging increased cross-cultural interaction between international and host country students and enhanced international students' academic performance is revealed. Finally, participants agreed that although understaffed, the Office of International Affairs provided unparalleled support that

helped them to adjust to the social and cultural context of the HBCU. This allowed these students to take advantage of all that Umoja University had to offer.

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest that there are lessons to be learned and implications for both HBCUs and international students who desire to study at minority serving institutions. We preface our suggestions by stating that all international students are different and so are HBCUs. Therefore, our suggestions are based on the lived experiences of these particular participants and this particular HBCU. While HBCUs are beacons of light for diverse populations of students, they must always consider their capacity for culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse international students. If international students are the subject of University recruitment efforts, students, faculty, support staff, and administration must be provided ongoing trainings to anticipate and prepare for cultural conflict and to provide support structures for these populations of students (Godwin, 2019). Organized, research-based language support for international students must also be provided on campus. It is not enough to rely on language admission requirements, as they are not predictors of academic success (Reppert et al., 2017). International students continue to need support with unfamiliar language structures – both social and academic.

To conclude, we suggest that international students take on some of the responsibility of learning about the culture of HBCUs as they prepare for admission and matriculation. Like PWIs, HBCUs have their own unique cultures. HBCUs are multicultural, multilingual, heterogenous spaces and international students must seek out opportunities to facilitate their language learning and embrace the social languages and nuances of these unique spaces. HBCUs, like most American institutions, value gender equality. At Umoja University, females lead most of the administrative offices. Currently, there is a female president, female Dean of Academic Affairs, female Dean of the Graduate School, and the list goes on. International students from more homogenous patriarchal societies must find ways to adjust to female voices being the dominant voices in their classrooms and across campus. These students have done just that. Finally, it is likely that the student body and faculty make-up of an HBCU will be majority African American and/or other peoples of color. Any sense of belonging will be compromised if international students internalize the racial biases and negative discourses prevalent in American society and the media.

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