The Development of Arab and Muslim American Studies in Ann Arbor

Today, an estimated 3.5 million Arab Americans and an overlapping 8 million Muslim Americans live in the United States. Michigan is a major center for those large and growing populations. The Detroit metropolitan region has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation (almost half a million in 2010). The Arab region and its diasporas have become increasingly central to U.S. history, diplomacy, and politics. Since September 11, 2001, many disciplines have paid increased attention to this population, and also to the way that it has frequently been racialized in terms of Islam—although of course not all Arabs are Muslim (in the United States the proportion is about half) and globally less than 20% of Muslims are Arab. A distinctive interdisciplinary field has emerged focusing on both Arab and Muslim Americans, and the global forces that must be apprehended to understand their history and lives. This research thus not only constitutes a new ethnic studies program, but also connects with work on African-Americans, South Asian Americans and other groups, and converges with the American Studies turn to thinking about "America in the world."

The Arab-American studies focus in American Culture was developed by two assistant professors. In 2003, Nadine Naber was hired as a joint appointment in the American Culture and Women's Studies Programs; in 2005 Evelyn Alsultany was appointed wholly in American Culture. It is not unusual in ethnic studies fields—indeed if anything it is characteristic—for dedicated junior faculty to play leadership roles in program and curriculum development. As they engaged in this work on behalf of their developing field and the University, both Naber and Alsultany achieved excellent individual records as scholars and teachers and were promoted to the rank of Associate Professor. In 2013, as American Culture (now accorded Departmental status) was planning to institute the program formally and expand the faculty with a third appointment, Naber was recruited to another institution. A lecturer who contributed two courses each year also resigned for personal reasons in 2014. Thus not only our ability to develop the program, but even our ability to maintain our current curriculum, has been at risk. The current joint search with Women's Studies was not designed to replace Naber, but rather to enable us to remain competitive and continue to contribute as Arab and Muslim American Studies develops. In addition, during Fall 2014, an Advisory Board drawing from faculty members across campus was formed. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement, strengthening the Program and enabling connections between researchers with established or developing interests in the field. Programming sponsored by the unit also benefits the campus as a whole.

The Department's new minor in Arab and Muslim American Studies was approved by the LSA Curriculum Committee and becomes available in Winter 2015. (This replaces our certificate in Arab American Studies, which was earned by 42 students between 2010 and 2014.) Students majoring in another field—whether humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences--and interested in Arab and/or Muslim American experiences, culture, and politics, can enhance and deepen their thinking about those communities by taking a

systematic supplement of courses designed from an interdisciplinary perspective. Our courses on this topic generate the high levels of interest among undergraduates. Arab and Muslim American students who feel painfully marginalized on campus--they experience racism, but are not acknowledged as an underrepresented minority—enroll. Other students are also deeply interested in learning about Arab and Muslim American communities, given the local and national consequences of the ongoing 'War on Terror' and pressing political issues from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the emergence of ISIS—and they enroll. These courses are sites of crucial, difficult dialogue. They directly affect student attitudes during their time on campus. And they exemplify the role of the liberal arts in developing our students' capacity to understand, and be purposeful and creative in engaging, the dilemmas of our era.

Only two other universities in the world offer a minor or dedicated curriculum in Arab and/Muslim American Studies: San Francisco State University and the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Neither grants a Ph.D. in the field, and we have already recruited—indeed we have already graduated-doctoral students in this interdisciplinary field. The Department of American Culture has close and cordial relations with Arab American Studies at Dearborn, but we are convinced that this field should not be ceded to theme. It is a regional responsibility for the flagship campus of University of Michigan, located in a center of the Arab American population, to play a leading role in this field. We have the opportunity to succeed here both because of the Department of American Culture's interdisciplinary and cross-cultural strengths, and because the institutional culture in LSA and at UM generally sustains a remarkably robust ability to assess innovative work.

June Howard & Evelyn Alsultany, 4 January 2015