Implementation of Middle Eastern/North African Identity Category

Proposal

To implement a Middle Eastern/North African (ME/NA) identity category option to be used on the application for undergraduate and graduate admissions to the University of Michigan. For example, please see appendix A below from a recent University of Michigan Diversity, Equity and Inclusion campus climate survey that included "Middle Eastern/North African" as an option to the question asking participants to "please indicate the racial or ethnic group(s) with which you identify."

Historical Context

The history of categorizing people from the Middle East and North Africa in the United States is contradictory and complex. Given that whiteness was a prerequisite to citizenship until 1952 (with exceptions made for African Americans and some Native Americans to have access to unequal citizenship), those who did not fit the binary black-white racial structure, such a Asians, South Asians, Mexicans, and Arabs made arguments for their citizenship through claiming whiteness.[1] For example, George Dow, a Christian from Syria was granted citizenship in 1915 after being denied twice in 1914. The judges who presided over his two 1914 naturalization cases argued that Syrians were not white according to the meaning of the statute, while the judge in 1915 argued that they were. However, Ahmed Hassan, a Yemeni Muslim, was denied citizenship in 1942 because he was not considered to be a white person. Furthermore, that fact that he was Muslim led the judge to determine that it would be unlikely that he would be able to assimilate.

Such pathways to citizenship based on race and religion was abolished in 1952, but their legacy remains in terms of who is considered to be a "real" American. The racial status of Arabs and other Middle Easterners (Turks, Iranians, and minority groups like Chaldeans, Kurds, Berbers, etc.) remains ambiguous. Middle Eastern and North African Americans, like Latinos/as, span the "racial" spectrum in terms of appearance. They come from over 22 countries. Some appear white, pass as white, and experience themselves as white in the United States. Others, however, are not white in appearance or experience. Yet others might have an ambiguous appearance and have names (e.g. Mohammad) or other visual features (e.g. wear a hijab or a long beard) that mark them as "Other." While Arab and Muslim identities are not necessarily one and the same, these identities have been conflated through racializing processes.

Middle Easterners are expected to check the "white" box even though many do not identify as white or experience themselves as white in the U.S. Especially in the post-9/11 environment, the racialization of Arabs and Muslims has intensified leading to an increase in hate crimes, workplace and airline discrimination, and government surveillance. Persons perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim have been targeted for harassment or violence based on the

[1] Ian Haney Lopez, White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race," NYU Press, 2006.

assumption that they are a potential threat to US national security.[2] Arab American civil rights groups have been lobbying for a census category since the 1990s and currently, it is very likely that a MENA box will be added to the 2020 census.

Rationalization

Along with having to identify as white, the Middle Eastern and North African (ME/NA) community has historically raised the concern that there is a lack of official recognition of their identities and existence on campus. In these cases, ME/NA students must identify as white on a range of documents and forms (e.g. U.S. Census, CommonApp, graduate school applications, University job applications, etc.). The lack of institutional memory, documentation, and recognition regarding the historical presence of the ME/NA community on campus contribute further to the severity of the issue and disempowerment of the ME/NA community. The inability to collectively identify ME/NA students is problematic for a scope of reasons that impact campus climate including tracking recruitment and retention rates, allocation of funding, informing students of available resources, and bias incident reporting.

Regarding the experiences of students on campus, please see the attached Islamophobia Working Group 2016 report, "Including Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Students in the University's Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion."[3] This report documents student experiences with Islamophobia on campus including a survey of 200 self-identified Muslim American students that revealed "63% have experienced discrimination based on their religious identity." Another survey of 110 students who identify as Muslim at the University of Michigan indicated that 50% have witnessed the perpetuation of Islamophobia on campus by staff, faculty, and students. Among the report's recommendations, which focus on creating a more inclusive campus for MENA identified students and those impacted by Islamophobia, is to "add a distinct designation for Arab, Muslim, and MENA students and faculty on the undergraduate/graduate applications and on pool reports when faculty and staff are hired."

Proposed Use

Assessing disparities in different sectors such as socioeconomic status, mental health, physical health, rates of hate crimes or gendered violence, or representation issues (in terms of students, staff, faculty, and administrators) begins with identifying and quantifying a population of people.

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[2] Nadine Naber, "'Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!': Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11," in Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects, Syracuse University Press, 2007, 276-304.

[3] "Including Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Students in the University's Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," The Islamophobia Working Group, University of Michigan, February 25, 2016,

For the University, the ability to ascertain who identifies with the ME/NA community is a necessary step in developing programs and interventions to address any disparities and to achieve DEI goals. This data is critical to examining the following:

Efforts to address retention and persistence such as:

- Academic retention rates
- Academic achievement disparities
- Graduation rates
- Drop-out rates, and potentially access to higher education at the University
- Bias Incidents
- Mentorship to students provided by Faculty and Staff along and/or peer-to-peer support
- Health Services

Outreach to students about resources available on campus such as:

- AMAS (Arab and Muslim American Studies program)
- Arab Graduation - Big Ihtifal (Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives)
- Arab Heritage Month (Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs)
- Connecting students to additional community spaces including student organizations

Strategic resources such as:

- University relationships to donors regarding development and alumni relations

In a current context of anti-Muslim and anti-ME/NA racism that contributes to a climate of ongoing political, economic, cultural, and psychological marginalization for ME/NA students, it is important to track this community's progress and make resources visible to them. As mentioned earlier, the current racial categories homogenizes these issues by grouping ME/NA students under a white category, therefore skewing data on white students and failing to collect any potential data about ME/NA students. Collecting this data will result in better serving our ME/NA students and thus in promoting a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus environment.

Critical Population

The ME/NA identity category must represent persons with origins in the Middle East/North Africa regardless of their nativity status or parental place of birth; it should include the 22 countries that are part of the ***League of Arab States*** (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen); ***Non-Arab MENA States*** (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Armenia, etc.) and ***Pan-national communities*** (Assyrians/Chaldeans, Kurds, Berber, Circassians, etc.).

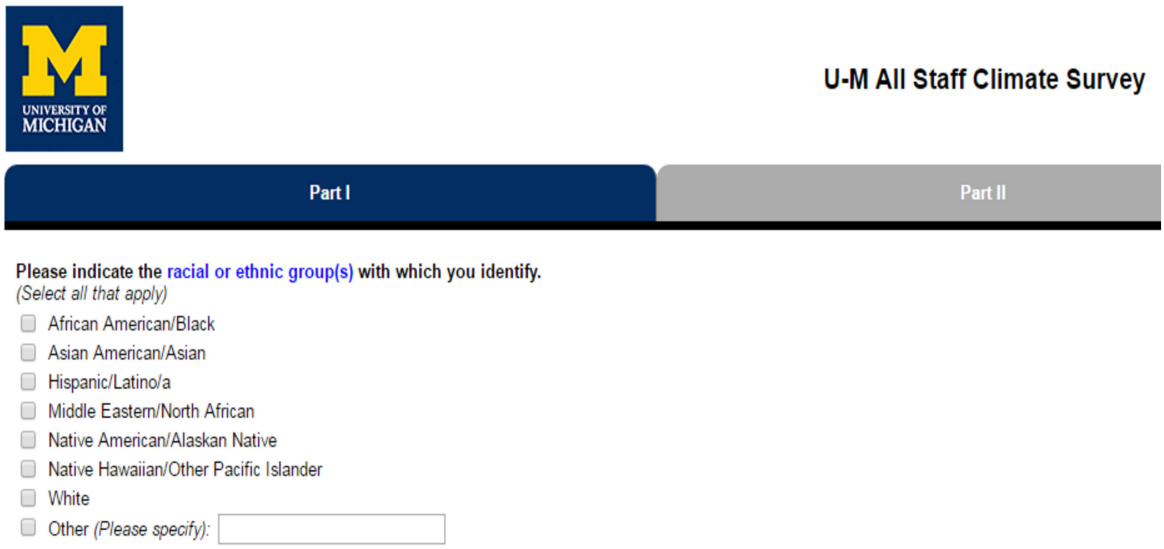
Data Collection

A push to collect demographic data regarding ME/NA can be seen nationwide. Included below are a few examples of data collection:

- At the University of Michigan, recent surveys and methods of data collection have included a ME/NA category on the DEI Climate Survey, along with Student Life Units (The University Career Center) and Change It Up Programs (required for all first-year students).
- At a state level, Michigan's health care system includes ME/NA.
- At a national level, a proposal to include ME/NA on the 2020 US Census is an active focus, and the University of California system has utilized a similar category since 2013 "Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA)" to utilize data to best serve their students.
- Notably, students at the University of Maryland - College Park and Brown University are also currently working with administrators to collect demographic data that will name and include ME/NA students, staff and faculty.

Appendix A

DEI Staff Climate Survey: "Please indicate the racial or ethnic group(s) with which you identify."



Appendix B

Current Common Application race/ethnicity question:

