Proposal

The creation of a Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) box to be marked in the race section of applications to the University of Michigan.

Modern Context

Arabs and other MENA identified peoples are currently grouped under the “White” category. A movement to check the “Other” box began prior to the 2010 Census. (http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/04/01/census.check.it.right.campaign/). This has caused the Census Collection Bureau to have widely misinformed calculations on the number of MENA identified individuals within the United States. The estimated Arab population from the Census of 2010 was roughly 2 million, but the Arab American Institute Foundation estimates the real number of Arab Americans to be closer to 3.7 million. (http://b.3cdn.net/aai/44b17815d8b386bf16_v0m6iv4b5.pdf) This does not include all of the different identities within the larger MENA category, which some estimates have put around 6 million MENA identified Americans. (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) This ambiguous system has led to a lack of grants, scholarships, and general social services for the MENA community within the United States and, particularly, within the University of Michigan, as it is still not known how many MENA students actually attend the school.

Historical Background

Arabs and MENA identified individuals originally tried to identify themselves as “White” due to the waves of xenophobia and anti-Asian racism that swept through the United States during the first half of the 20th century. In 1944, MENA Americans were allowed to be listed as “white” because it meant that they could apply to naturalize as US citizens; only “white Americans” were allowed to become US citizens until 1952. Thus, the policy of who can become United States citizens has changed, but the policy for identifying MENA individuals has remained the same for 73 years.

Moving Forward

The ideal would be to add a MENA category on the application to the University of Michigan so that students could identify themselves properly. The ME/NA category would be added to the race section of the application and applicants can later denote their more specific identity (Burbur, Kurd, Egyptian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Moroccan, etc.) in the ethnicity section while also denoting their religion in the appropriate religious section. With the Census bureau looking at better ways to identify race for the upcoming 2020 census (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/14/u-s-census-looking-at-big-changes-in-how-it-asks-about-race-and-ethnicity/), one of which will be the stated ME/NA category, (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/24/census-bureau-explores-new-middle-eastnorth-africa-ethnic-category/), the University of Michigan should help lead the movement in changing this decades old policy to better reflect the modern world in which we live.

Explanatory Video

This video sums up the situation well: http://www.newsy.com/videos/why-many-arab-americans-check-white-on-the-us-census