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Report on Saudi International Students at HSU

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“I felt like we are not welcomed as Arab [students] at Humboldt State University”
Report on Saudi International Students at HSU

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Overview

As a Saudi international student studying abroad at Humboldt State University (HSU), in the Public Sociology Master’s Degree Program, I completed a needs assessment on Saudi international students at HSU as my required placement project. Between May 2017 and January 2018, I surveyed current Saudi international students at HSU (n=18) to discover their needs, challenges and barriers to success in Humboldt County and at HSU, and ask them about possible suggestions for Humboldt County and HSU from their perspectives. I also completed semi-structured interviews with current and former HSU Saudi international students (n=8) to get more in depth stories and suggestions (IRB #16-259).

This is an Executive Report, to shed light on these students’ experiences, difficulties, and needs at HSU. I provide an overview of my quantitative and qualitative findings, as well as some suggestions that might help the decision-makers at HSU to better understand Saudi students’ experiences, needs, difficulties while living and studying in Humboldt County. It is my hope this report will inspire HSU and Humboldt County work to make these students feel more included at HSU and in the surrounding community. It is also my hope to help Saudi students and their families feel welcomed and valued as members of the community, and for students to be successful in their academic careers.

In this report, I describe the difficulties that Saudi international students encountered in Humboldt County and at HSU. Unless specified, the statistics are from the survey data, and the quotes from the interviews. Along with each of the challenges, I provide a suggestion for HSU, based on what these students have said during the interviews. For more in depth information on all aspects of this study, please see my 2018 MA thesis entitled: “Religion, Language, Gender, and Culture: Challenges Experienced by Saudi International Students in Humboldt County.”

On page 3 of this report, I present the demographics of the students who participated in my study. On page 4, I discuss the background of Saudi international students studying abroad, and outline unique challenges faced by these students. On pages 5- 8 I report what current and former Saudi HSU students had to say about their needs and challenges, looking at academics, Host Families, religious and cultural needs and housing challenges. I also outline some of the students’ favorite parts of life at HSU. I end with references, and suggested readings for further insight into supporting Saudi international students at HSU.
Study Respondents

**Survey (n = 18)**

- **Gender**
  - Female: 6% (♀)
  - Male: 94% (♂)

- **Marital Status**
  - Single: 89%
  - Married: 11%

- **Age**
  - 18-22: 44%
  - 23-27: 50%
  - 28-32: 6%
  - 33-37: 0%

- **First-generation studying abroad**: 72%
- **Lived in Humboldt County for more than two years**: 67%

**Interviews (n = 8)**

- **Gender**
  - Female: 33% (♀)
  - Male: 67% (♂)

- **Marital Status**
  - Single: 67%
  - Married: 33%

- **Age**
  - 18-22: 13%
  - 23-27: 61%
  - 28-32: 13%
  - 33-37: 13%

- **First-generation studying abroad**: 88%
- **Lived in Humboldt County for more than two years**: 63%
Background

In 2005, the number of Saudi international students in the U.S increased dramatically after King Abdullah establish a Saudi study abroad program funded by the Saudi government; this is called the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) (The Ministry of Higher Education 2006; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015). In 2015, the total number of Saudis living in the United States was 125,513: that included 106,640 students and 18,873 companions to those students (Al-Shuwayer 2015). Although the population of Saudi international students is large, few studies have focused exclusively on Saudi international students and investigated their unique experiences (Alhazmi 2010; Rundles 2013; Heyn 2013; Almotery 2014; Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015).

Saudi international students (SIS) are Arab, Muslim, and usually non-English speakers. Generally, SIS who are studying in the U.S. have unique needs and challenges, even compared to other native and international students, for the following reasons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>SIS are transitioning from the most gender-segregated environment in the world to a mixed-gender environment (Alhazmi 2010; Nassif and Gunter 2008). In addition, due to gender norms from Saudi Arabia, female students who study abroad in the U.S. may be accompanied by a male guardian, such as a brother or close family member (Almotery 2014).</td>
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<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE</td>
<td>The adjustment process for SIS is often difficult because of the language barrier with English, especially during the first few months. This is made more challenging by American accents, the rate of speech, and slang vocabularies (Alhazmi 2010; Heyn 2013). Where international students from other countries may have studied English, or been exposed to American accents through pop culture like TV and movies, this is not the case for SIS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACADEMICS</td>
<td>The educational system is very different between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. in many aspects including teaching methods, curricula, and the relationship between the instructor and students (Alhazmi 2010; Al-Hattami 2014; Barnawi 2009 Mcdermott-Levy 2011). For example, SIS have not been exposed to active learning techniques or group discussions, as widely used at HSU, or norms around visiting professors in office hours to ask for help or clarification.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CULTURE</td>
<td>There are many cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. on many levels. This includes the level of religiosity, and the norms around social relationships. These differences in cultures often contribute to culture shock and misunderstandings, and make the adjustment process for these students more difficult (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern 2015).</td>
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<td>RELIGION</td>
<td>Transitioning from a collective and religious country to an individualistic and secular country can be very difficult for Saudi international students, who are used to the daily norms and rituals of their home country, and for whom the dietary guidelines are crucial (Mcdermott-Levy 2011).</td>
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Challenges and Needs

Academic Challenges

In my study, HSU Saudi international students reported facing academic difficulties related to language. There was also a perceived gap between HSU SIS and professors because of the cultural differences. HSU Saudi students reported difficulties with the short time allotted for exams and projects, and English language barriers with common course activities such as writing papers, conducting research, giving presentations, asking questions in class, and performing group work. As an example, one survey participant commented:

I have just graduated from HSU, but I have faced difficulties seeking my degree from the university. I have always marked down points and grades for the language barrier, even with informing the instructors that I might be facing difficulties in many of readings, writing (spelling), and pronouncing amount of words.

HSU can assist Saudi international students by giving them more time for their academic work such as more time to complete writings, readings, and exams. As one participant explained:

I really hope that all Saudi students get more time on exams regardless if they need it or not because [the extra time] will help us to achieve academic excellence, and will help us reduce stress... [I]magine taking an exam that’s not in not your language! Sometimes the questions in the exam come in a complicated way and you need more time to break down the question, understand it, then answer the question. [F]or students whose native language is English, they will answer better and get higher grades than Saudi students even if they don’t study, although Saudi students study, say, 10 hours [more than American students]. [T]hey get better grades even if they don’t study] because this is their language and they will understand the exam questions, but for all Saudi students, we usually study English in just one year.

SIS could also benefit from additional advising and mentorship beyond help with registering for classes. Nearly all SIS respondents (94%) reported it was “important” or “very important” to receive support and academic advising from HSU professors. HSU SIS could also benefit from opportunities to build community to provide social and emotional support, such as from a student organization, as many U.S. universities have for Saudi students.

61% of Saudi Students report they would like to have a Saudi Student Organization at HSU

Suggestions

- Saudi International Students given more time to complete exams
- Creation of Saudi student organization
**The Host Family**

In this study, I found the role of the Host Family was very important, as it impacted the experiences of Saudi international students in both positive and negative ways. In the interviews, I found two participants had negative experiences with their Host Families, and only one student reported a positive experience. The negative experiences of both participants were due mostly to the absence of the Host Family; these students wanted to engage with their hosts to improve their English ability and understand U.S. culture, but the Host Family interacted with them minimally. One of these students reported living with several Host Families because he did not find a Host Family that would spend enough time with him every day to improve his English skills:

*The Host Family doesn’t talk with you like you don’t get any benefit from them. Also, they don’t provide good services like food and other services. Basically, you don’t meet them and you don’t see them at all. So, I was transitioning between families looking for something unique.*

Some SIS may need to find a Host Family who is willing to sit and talk with them regularly to help them improve their language and confidence. It would also be helpful for HSU staff to (1) match SIS with families based on the needs of the students, and the willingness of the Host Family to provide English language interactions; (2) be clear with SIS about the roles and expectations of Host Families; and (3) communicate with Host Families about the unique needs and challenges of SIS. Matching these students with a Host Family that has had Saudi students, or has hosted students with similar needs, could help avoid some of the misunderstandings participants reported in the interviews. Living with Host Families is an opportunity for SIS to learn more about U.S. culture and norms, which can help with the culture shocks they are experiencing in their academic lives, and could also help SIS to understand more about U.S. history and culture, as is important to many of the SIS.

*78% of Saudi Students report it is important to them to learn more about U.S. History and Culture*

**Suggestions**

- Match SIS with Host Families based on needs of students and willingness of Host Families to interact
- Clearly define roles and expectations between Host Families and SIS
- Provide opportunity for SIS and Host Families to provide feedback on experiences
Religious and Cultural Challenges

Almost all HSU SIS reported missing the religious environment of Saudi Arabia. As Muslim students, the students reported difficulty maintaining religious practices on the HSU campus. For example, they struggled to consistently find an adequate space and opportunity to adhere to specific prayer times, and many discussed their challenges finding and eating Halal food, as required by Islam. One participant reported:

... sometimes I feel I need necessary things and it’s hard to find them here in Humboldt. For example, Arabic Restaurants, and shopping malls...I’m forced to shop online.

As it is so core to their identity, HSU could promote success for SIS by supporting their efforts to maintain their religious practices while attending HSU. HSU could provide a room for them inside the campus to pray between their classes, and either work with a local grocery store to bring in Halal food, or offer students monthly transportation to a city with Halal options.

63% of Saudi Students reported they were dissatisfied with food options in Humboldt County

Housing Challenges

All interview participants talked about having difficulties with housing in Humboldt County. For example, one participant described how it was difficult for her to find a house:

... when I came here to Humboldt one of the difficulties that I faced was housing, because housing here [in Arcata] is not easy to get... it was not easy in the beginning, the first two weeks after I got here [in Arcata], I stayed in a hotel because I couldn’t find any housing option available, but the Center for International Programs helped me get a house with a roommate.

As result of housing issues, one SIS eventually transferred to another university. As housing is also an issue for the broader student population, HSU could prioritize supporting students to secure adequate housing.

83% of Saudi Students reported needing housing assistance

Suggestions

- Dedicate several spaces around campus where students can regularly pray
- Provide access to Halal food by importing it locally, or providing transportation to larger cities with access
- Educate faculty and staff about important religious holidays and rituals
- Provide extra housing-related support to SIS before and after arrival
Conclusion

To understand the experiences of Saudi international students studying and living in Humboldt County, and attending Humboldt State University, I conducted a survey and semi-structured interviews of current and former students. I gained some insight into the students’ experiences, including many challenges they face that chip away at their study abroad experience.

While many of the students expressed frustrations and concerns, many students also shared positive experiences about their time in Humboldt County and at HSU. More than three-fifths of the survey respondents (61%) reported they found their HSU professors to be friendly, and nearly three-quarters (72%) found HSU students to be friendly. Many Saudi students also appreciated the beauty of Humboldt County. As one respondent reported:

_Humboldt County is generally very good and the environment is very good for students and I like the wonderful nature and wonderful views that are not found in my country, for example, the continuous rain especially in the winter. As well as camps and beaches._

Other students discussed how they enjoyed the college environment, and the overall friendly atmosphere of Humboldt County. One Saudi student reported:

_Humboldt is a very beautiful county because it is a college town which is good for students. Living in Humboldt is excellent and comfortable because the safety is very excellent and the Humboldt people are very friendly._

**72% of Saudi Students found HSU staff to be helpful**

Given we are only in the first few years the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), it may be that there will be many more Saudi international students moving to Humboldt County in the next few years to learn English and attend Humboldt State University. Several years into the program, it appears the students could use some extra supports and resources to help them with their transition, their time here, and their academic success. I hope this report gives some insights into the experiences of these students, and some concrete strategies for Humboldt State University. I hope this will lead to even greater student success for our international students.
References


Recommended Reading


