

The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities

Policy Recommendations

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Universities Should Offer Islamic Civilization as a Regular Course

Almost all colleges and universities in the USA offer courses on world civilizations in their undergraduate programs as part of the general education requirement. Students take mandatory courses on Western civilization and, subject to availability of faculty resources, optional courses on Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilizations. In most places, however, primary emphasis remains on the study of Western tradition, with non-Western traditions given cursory treatment.

These courses are usually two-semester (or three-quarter) sequence courses that constitute the core of the liberal arts education at the undergraduate level. The University of Chicago, for example, has developed its own comprehensive curriculum and reading material for the sequence on Islamic civilization that was originally conceived by the great Chicago historian Marshall Hodgson. We suggest that other schools should follow this example and offer Islamic civilization as an independent course and one of the options available to the students in their general education requirement. The Islamic civilization course should be conceived as a comprehensive pedagogic enterprise, encompassing introduction to the core Islamic texts, beliefs, and practices; an overview of Islamic history in the context of world historical developments; major landmarks in the development of Islamic civilization and its contributions to the arts, literature, philosophy, and science; varieties of Islamic intellectual and philosophical traditions; and diversity of Islamic experiences in different geographical contexts.

How to Structure Introductory Courses on Islam

Introductory courses on Islam, as they are taught in most U.S. colleges and universities, attempt to accomplish too much in the course of a single semester or quarter, teaching: Islamic beliefs and practices, Islamic history spread over fourteen centuries, Islamic socio-religious institutions and their development in history, Islamic mysticism, Islam and gender, Islam in the contemporary world, and Islam and its relations with the West and Western modernity. We believe that this all-encompassing and over-arching approach does not allow the students to study Islam as a faith in-depth. We suggest that introductory level courses (Islam 101) should exclusively focus on the normative structure and texts of Islam with an emphasis on Islam as a living (and lived) faith. Other aspects may be dealt with in separate, topical courses.

Qualified Scholars Should Teach Courses on Islam and its Civilization

We do not in any way suggest that only Muslim scholars are either capable or eligible to teach courses on Islam in American colleges and universities; yet, it is our belief that students will benefit more from an “insider” perspective, especially in advanced level

courses on specialized areas such as theology, law, mysticism, and so forth. Islamic studies programs in American universities and colleges should therefore make proactive efforts to recruit qualified Muslim scholars to teach specialized and advanced courses on Islam and Islamic civilization.

Establish Centers and Programs for the Study of Islam and its Societies

Programs and courses developed by university and college departments and centers have always served as vehicles for national self-definition and for the construction of self and society. Muslim participation in the construction of knowledge and the incorporation of Muslims in the American public sphere cannot take place without this crucial input from the academy. Islam today is not only a source of moral inspiration for 1.5 billion Muslims throughout all the continents of the world, and an important moral actor in the religio-intellectual landscape of the West, but is also a significant factor in the shaping of international developments. It is, therefore, imperative for the American academic institutions to establish intellectually stimulating and well-staffed centers and programs for the study of Islam and Islamic societies to create a better understanding of the faith and cultures of one-fifth of humanity.

American Muslims Should Step Forward and Fund More University Programs

American Muslims are a significant part of the American social landscape. Therefore it is in their best interests to organize themselves effectively for the specific task of gaining a more favorable image in the academy. The time has come for both individual Muslim philanthropists and Muslim communities in various parts of the U.S. to come forward and finance university chairs, teaching fellowships, students' scholarships, and specialized programs for the study and teaching of Islam and Islamic civilization. A few attempts have been made in this regard but community leadership should plan to fund at least five more chairs in major universities and ten chairs in second-tier universities and reputable liberal arts colleges. In addition, named scholarships for graduate students in Islamic studies and fellowships for dissertation research on topics related to Islam, should be sponsored by the community through the schools that already have established programs in Islamic studies. Furthermore:

- Muslim community funding for academic programs in Islamic studies should be allocated to several campuses so the community has a stake in several places rather than a few campuses. At the same time, however, if funds are distributed too thinly over too many campuses, there will be no discernable impact. A balance has to be struck between the two, that is the creation of as wide a stake as possible across many American campuses, and the assurance that funds allocated have some positive and tangible impact on the quality of teaching and research in Islamic studies that exists or takes place.
- Muslim philanthropists and communities should finance Islamic studies programs funding those schools that already have certain elements set in place including established infrastructure, a rudimentary program, a measure of commitment, and

some interested faculty members in the fields of Islamic studies/religious studies/Middle Eastern studies. Only then will the school be able to make good use of funds to improve upon their already existing programs and facilities.

- Preference should be given to those schools that have a highly regarded liberal arts and humanities orientation in their undergraduate education thereby providing a very hospitable environment for an Islamic/Arabic studies program to develop.

Donor Options

Several options are available for Muslim donors to promote Islamic studies. Donors include individuals, communities, Muslim multinationals, and Muslim governments.

- Establish chairs of Islamic/Arabic Studies in selected campuses
- Establish programs, centers, or committees of Islamic studies within the existing departments or set of departments
- Fund the introduction of courses on Islam and the Arabic language
- Provide funding for faculty research in Islamic studies
- Provide funds for students' scholarships for M.A.s and Ph.D.s in Islamic studies
- Provide funds to colleges and universities to establish regular lecture series on Islam
- Provide funds to American students studying Islam for travel to Muslim countries and undertake courses at universities in the Muslim world as exchange students

Program Focus on Muslim Community and Societies

The most concrete and visible manifestation of Islam in the U.S. is the American Muslim community. Hence, an exclusive emphasis on the promotion of Islamic studies as an academic discipline in total isolation from the concrete reality of the American Muslim community and the Islamic world at large may serve some pedagogic goals, but it will not be of much help to Muslims in their present political predicament. Hence, our programmatic emphasis should be equally focused on strengthening the American Muslim community and creating a better understanding of its role in the larger American society; and creating a more discerning understanding of the realities of Islamic societies.

Another policy recommendation revolves around the issue of comprehensiveness and social accessibility. Judging from the historical record of funding of institutions of higher learning by donors interested in Islamic studies, it is significant that Harvard, Stanford, and Georgetown Universities have enjoyed the lion's share of the wealth from these generous donors. Concerned about the potential effect of diversity investment in other halls of learning at junior colleges and liberal arts departments, it is suggested that the teaching of world religions and cultures at these centers of learning could benefit both the Muslim community and the larger society. Hopefully, through such an investment, American Muslim communities would see clearly the connections between American philanthropy and the Muslim sense of charity.

Utilize Muslim Scholarship

We believe that despite the integrity, legitimacy, and achievements of Muslim scholarship regarding Islam, discourse on Islamic studies in the U.S. in particular, and the West in general, has, until recently, remained, at best, indifferent toward or even dismissive of Muslim scholarship. We believe this trend has deprived the American academy of a third recommendation that deserves immediate action. This centers on the question of Muslim opinions on and attitudes towards social reality in American life and culture. Since America is a vast society with multiple ethnicities, religious groupings, and divergent philosophies of life, it makes good policy for Muslim leaders to support programs on college campuses that bring younger generations of Muslims closer to mainstream America. Through such acts of financial responsibility and engagement within the larger society, American Muslim communities around the U.S. could prosper primarily as a result of gaining knowledge about themselves and the triumph of enlightenment over prejudice and ignorance.

Muslim Governments Should Support Academic Efforts in the U.S.

In addition to the commitment of American Muslims willing to support Islamic studies programs in America, it is also necessary for Muslim government abroad to pay close attention to the academic offerings of the U.S. By reading and understanding the academic products of American society, Muslim governments should be able to contribute to the engine that keeps America at the cutting edge of science and technology today. Such participation could reaffirm the link between reliable knowledge about Islam and Muslims and responsibility in public policy based on sound research.

Related to the above-mentioned policy recommendation is another one that deals with the imperative for international peace and security. By investing heavily in U.S. teaching institutions, one is relying on the fruits of its research centers and the continuing effects of its findings. A public policy that translates socially what is felt privately by Muslims in their daily struggles with the demons brought into being by 9/11 can only come into being when government action in the Muslim world corresponds with global Muslim desire to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world.

Introduce Islamic-Related Courses in Government

Another policy recommendation deals with the introduction of Islamic-related courses in government training institutions, for example, in diplomatic training centers and military academies. In order for the U.S. to establish relationships of friendship and cooperation with the world of Islam, it must ensure that its policy-makers, diplomats, and military officers are well-informed about their Muslim neighbors and friends in international relations. Most recent setbacks and blunders in the formulation and execution of our policies toward the Muslim world, and especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, indicate the extent of the wide gap which exists between the academy and policymaking centers.

Interfaith Movements and Religious Departments Should Play a Role

One policy recommendation takes into account the role and place of interfaith movements in the faithful distribution of religious knowledge among the constituting members of their multi-religious societies. The departments of religions and theology in colleges and universities can play an important role in initiating interfaith understanding. Being a new kid on the block and determined to take its rightful place within American societies, it is imperative for Muslims to invest heavily in interfaith groups that serve as integrative vehicles for the social communication and inter-religious relationships.

Establish a Website for Islamic Studies in the U.S.

Another recommendation that deserves immediate attention is the development of a website to disseminate information about the state of Islamic studies in American universities for prospective students, faculty, and interested scholars from all parts of the globe.

Educate Students and the Public on Shari'ah

A policy recommendation that addresses the challenges of Shari'ah deserves our attention because of the widespread ignorance of this Islamic legal tradition. A carefully planned educational program, would allow students and their teachers to fill the gap between knowledge and practice. It would also serve as a new bridge of understanding for policy-makers, diplomats, and media as they struggle to shed ample light on issues that are often discussed in stereotypes and caricatures.

Continued Translation of Islamic Books into English

Another policy recommendation is to embark upon a global and continuing translation of classic Islamic books into the English language. Through such efforts, American Muslims and others in the West can enrich and deepen their collective consciousness as they build bridges between their Western intellectual past and the collective unconscious of the Muslims.

This effort would also require the development of a necessary infrastructure for the collection and translation of contemporary important literature from all major Muslim languages, particularly Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, to English. By implementing such a policy, the field of Islamic studies stands to make the English-speaking person much more highly aware and appreciative of the great heritage of Islamic civilization. A good example of this in the West has been the successful appropriation of Roman and Greek thought into the core spirit of the English language.

Facilitate Meaningful Exchange Between Students

A policy recommendation that facilitates meaningful exchange between American students of Islam and their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world could benefit from the diverse approaches, methodologies, and understanding which prevail in the Muslim world. At present, not only is there a lack of scholarly communication and exchange between American scholars and scholars of Islamic studies in the Muslim

world, but there is also an almost total lack of awareness of developments in Islamic studies in continental Europe and Japan. Through such an exchange program, American students of Islam could build upon the accomplishments of their colleagues abroad and the creativity of their colleagues at home.

Increase Outreach to the Policy World

Many observers note that the recent mushrooming growth of policy advocacy think tanks seems to have overshadowed the scholarly output and policy input of academic scholars. The result is that certain biased views on policy are being projected in the media and presented to policy makers as objective knowledge. This has nowhere been more evident than in the debate which took place over the invasion of Iraq when the advocates of a certain point of view, masquerading as academic experts but employed by think tanks, misled policy-makers and the entire nation into a quagmire. This could not have been possible if academics in the fields of Islamic studies/Middle Eastern studies had not shied away from their role as public intellectuals. We suggest that the major Islamic studies/Middle Eastern Studies programs in American universities and colleges should strengthen their community/public outreach programs to disseminate the fruits of their scholarly works to the wider audience and to have an impact on public policy.