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IDENTITY AFFIRMATION AND CONFLICT: STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS AND INVOLVEMENT EXPERIENCES OF ARAB AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Arab American college students must navigate the paradox of being hypervisible as well as invisible while in college. They are a unique and diverse group of students whose lived experiences and ways of belonging are underexplored. In this study of 12 Arab American college students, participants discussed how they understand their Arab American identity and how they belong at their institution, as well as how engagement in student organizations and other means of student involvement impacted their experience with sense of belonging. Participants' involvement both affirmed their Arab American identity while also potentially causing conflict at times.

Considering varying identity-based scholarship in higher education, there is still little-known empirical research about Arab American college students and their overall college experience (Naber, 2021; Naser, 2021). Research shows Arab Americans are hypervisible in the media and face discrimination and racism regularly (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Research also suggests that negative stereotypes of Arabs directly relate to rates of discrimination and racism (Cainkar, 2006). Despite this, Arab Americans continue to be invisible in that they remain a marginalized group in the United States (Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2006; Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Further, these disparities are often hidden by the lack of disaggregated data and racial or ethnic classifications of Arabs on student forms and in census data (Awad et al., 2021; Cainkar, 2006; Maghbouleh et al., 2022). Because Arabs are categorized as white in most official data, their unique needs and experiences blend into data collected on white individuals. Thus, they are overlooked as People of Color.

Even more than a lack of scholarship on Arab American students' experiences in higher education is an area of opportunity regarding Arab American college students' involvement in campus activities and leadership. Nested in a larger, broader study about Arab American college students' experiences with a sense of belonging in higher education, this article offers insights on two aspects related to student involvement and leadership experiences. In this article, I ask: *What role do student activities and leadership play in supporting Arab students' sense of belonging in higher education?* This question and accompanying article allow us to identify one element of Arab American students' experience in higher education, specifically through campus activities involvement and leadership such as serving as an academic tutor, teaching assistant, or officer or member in a student organization. The following reviews the relevant literature, methodology, key findings, and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF ARABS AND ARAB AMERICANS AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility traverses all aspects of Arab Americans' lives, and Arab students have similar experiences in classroom and university settings (Cainkar, 2006; Mango, 2012; Naser, 2021). This could factor into why Arab American college students are overlooked within the higher education system. Despite there being limited research on Arab American college students, the following literature review consid-

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ers Arab Americans and history, the media portrayal of Arabs, and Islamophobia and discrimination faced by Arabs. In addition, how students achieve a sense of belonging related to their identity and involvement will be reviewed. I believe this context is a foundation for a better understanding of Arab American students, and thus, further contextualize their involvement experiences as introduced later in this article.

Historical Contexts

The first wave of Arab immigration began in the late 1800s (Awad, 2010, Cainkar, 2006), and by 1882, most Arab immigrants arrived from an Ottoman province that is modern-day Syria, which prompted U.S. officials to begin labeling all Arabs as "Turks" (Naber, 2000). In 1914, a judge in South Carolina ruled that "while Syrians may be Caucasians, they were not that particular free white person to whom the Act of Congress (1790) had denoted the privilege of citizenship" (Naber, 2000, p. 39). The federal courts continued to question whether Syrians had the right to gain citizenship, and in 1923, the 1914 court decision was reversed (Naber, 2000). Pursuing U.S. citizenship, some Arabs sought to be classified as white, rather than a unique racial and ethnic group. At the time, individuals with the white classification were more likely to be considered for U.S. citizenship than other racially minoritized immigrant groups (Awad et al., 2021).

Due to anti-immigrant rhetoric and discrimination, during the second wave of Arab immigration to the United States, most Arab immigrants began to 'Americanize' themselves to white American culture and standards by identifying as white, speaking English, anglicizing their names, and restricting who knew their ethnic identities (Naber, 2000). The second wave of Arab immigrants began in the late 1940s and had a larger number of Muslims than the first (Awad, 2010; Naber, 2000). Arab immigrants included refugees from the 1948 Palestine War, professionals, and university students (Naber, 2000). The third wave began in the 1960s, with Arab immigrants coming from more diverse religious and professional backgrounds than those who came to the United States in previous waves. The third wave of Arab immigrants had a stronger sense of Arab nationalism, were more critical of U.S. policy, and maintained connections to their cultural roots (Naber, 2000). The pan-ethnic term "Arab American" became popular after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 (Awad, 2010; Awad et al., 2021; Naber, 2000). The term quickly caught on as a political means for the media and government to identify other individuals based on geographic origins, culture, and religion (Cainkar, 2006; Naber, 2000).

Over time, research has found that about half of Arabs supported using the Arab and Arab American labels, while the other half did not (Awad et al., 2021). The latter population felt these labels did not reflect their culture, identity, ancestry, or sense of pride (Awad et al., 2021). Maghbouleh et al. (2022) found that when the Arab identity category was offered, the number of individuals identifying as exclusively white decreased, with only 10% selecting so. Furthermore, second-generation Arab immigrants, Muslims, non-religious Arabs, or those who experienced higher levels of discrimination were more likely to select the Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) classification over white (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). This new fidelity to Arab identity could be related to heightened surveillance, discrimination, and stigmatization of Arabs since September 11, 2001 (9/11) followed by the anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies that arose during the 2016 presidential campaign and the resulting administration (Maghbouleh et al., 2022). The Republican Presidential candidate ran on a platform that regularly targeted and dehumanized Arabs and Muslims (Hobb & Lajevardi, 2019). This rhetoric normalized and encouraged hatred towards Arabs and Muslims resulting in increased hate crimes among Arabs and Muslims (Hobb & Lajevardi, 2019). These incidents suggest that self-labeling is important when highlighting the identities of ethnic minority populations. Understanding the Arab identity is complex; it is critical to recognize how context and circumstances influence the evolution of the Arab identity, emphasizing the need for further exploration. Given the political and social climate in the United States and the increasing number of Arab Americans and Arab immigrants (Yalla Count Me In!, 2019), it is important to disaggregate the data to better understand Arabs' overall experiences and needs.

Media Portrayal of Arabs

U.S. media portray Arabs as homogeneous, despite the vast diversity of the population (Cainkar, 2006). This pan-Arab American identity began to emerge during the 1960s when the government and media began us-

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ing Arab American as a derogatory way to group individuals geographically, culturally, and religiously (Naber, 2000). Individuals' impressions of Arabs are impacted by continued negative narratives and portrayals of Arabs in the media. American media often conflate Arabs and Muslims, influencing the racialization of Islam and Muslim stereotypes (Cainkar, 2006). This continues to muddle the Arab American identity and perpetuate the assumption that all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are Arabs when, in fact, most Arabs in the United States identify as Christian (Awad, 2010). Arab Christians make up 77% of the Arab American population (Awad, 2010). Despite Christians being the prominent religious group of Arab Americans, the racialization of Islam continues.

Other well-known stereotypes include Arab men being portrayed as terrorists, controlling, or violent (Naber, 2000). Arab women are also depicted as oppressed by religious rules, cultural expectations, or the men in their lives (Naber, 2000). Further, Arab women often find themselves being addressed as the enemy or aliens in the media. When this happens in the classroom, some try to explain how Arab women belong in the United States while attempting to counteract the stereotypes and assumptions they have just made about them (Mango, 2012). This is understandably taxing on Arab women, leaving them feeling shocked, disappointed, and betrayed (Mango, 2012). Despite this, Arab women continue to feel the burden to educate those around them (Mango, 2012), even while these stereotypes continue promoting systematic Islamophobia and increasing the discrimination, violence, and othering they face. And this is just one example of how these experiences in the classroom affect Arab American college students' overall experience and sense of belonging in the education system specifically.

Islamophobia and Discrimination

Arab American college students in the United States suffered an increased number of attacks and beatings after the United States bombed Libya in 1986, directly impacting Arab faculty, staff, and students (Naber, 2000). During this period, Palestinian-American Islamic scholar, Isma'il Raji al Faruqi, and his wife were brutally murdered while their pregnant daughter, Anmar, was violently injured in their home (Naber, 2000). Then, in 1987, the "LA 8" were arrested and labeled as a "terrorist threat" for their humanitarian and cultural efforts. The case instilled fear among Arab Americans as the U.S. Department of Justice publicly stated its plans to arrest 10,000 Arab residents en masse and establish detention camps for possible deportation (Naber, 2000). To prevent further discrimination after 9/11, Arabs avoided places where they expected to experience discrimination, and some abandoned friends or jobs and even changed their names (Cainkar, 2006). As a result of the 2016 presidential campaign and election, Arabs continued to be attacked, harassed, and discriminated against (Naber, 2021). For instance, on the day the 2016 presidential election projected winner was announced on November 9, 2016, a San Diego State University student was robbed, and her car was stolen while on campus; during the attack, the assailants yelled ethnically derogatory and political statements at her (Jimenez & Moran, 2016). Additionally, since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, there has been increased violence and discrimination towards Arab Americans. For instance, Wadea Al Fayoume, a six-year-old boy, was murdered because he was Muslim and his mother, Hanaan Shahin was also stabbed several times while trying to protect him from the attack (Yan et al., 2023). Three American college students, Hisham Awartani, Kinnan Abdalhamid, and Tahseen Ahmed, were shot while walking in Awartani's grandmother's neighborhood (Al Jazeera, 2023).

According to the Arab American Institute Foundation, Arab American college students' academic success and emotional well-being are directly affected by these lived experiences (Naser, 2021). Peers often associate Arabs and Arab college students with terrorism, threats, and violence. Arab college students shared that this association was often magnified due to negative media stereotypes, and they had experienced being called racial slurs or made fun of at their universities (Naser, 2020, 2021). Further, Naser (2021) found that many Arab American college students felt that hostile political climates amplified their insecurities and, as a result, they often questioned their place in the United States. Whenever they saw terrorist attacks in the media, Arab college students often lived in fear that their peers would turn against them or blame them rather than the actual terrorists (Naser, 2020). Arab American college students live in a state of hyperarousal, permanent alert; constantly worrying about danger (Naser, 2021). Some are left numb and empty or feel like their experiences are dismissed, misinterpreted, or judged (Naser, 2021). These experiences directly impact Arab American college students' overall well-being and college experiences.

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Identity's Influence and Student Involvement

The various social identities students carry play a part in their sense of belonging. Moreover, identities like race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and more may intersect in ways that concurrently influence students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley et al., 1993; Strayhorn, 2019). For individuals to gain a sense of racial identity, they undergo internal processes of understanding ranging from a relative unawareness of one's racial identity to an understanding of their racial identity as it relates to their holistic self (Alvarez, 2002; Chan, 2017; Kim, 2012) related to societal forces of racialization and racism. Chan (2017) built on this and suggested that one may immerse themselves in a racial and ethnic community and negotiate their identity through the norms of the dominant white culture. During college, students encounter other cultures, identities, values, and norms that may differ from their own (Arar, 2017; King et al., 2013). Because of this, college students continually examine, deconstruct, and reconstruct their identities related to the norms and values of others around them (Arar, 2017; French et al., 2006; Fries-Britt et al., 2014). For racially and ethnically diverse students, additional stressors are placed on them as they navigate differing expectations and norms of their college communities and their racial and ethnic identity and culture (Nasir & Saxe, 2003).

Identity is perhaps one of the most important or most studied factors in Strayhorn's model of sense of belonging. Individuals' sense of belonging can be positively impacted by making connections with others who carry comparable identities and participate in non-curricular activities (DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Hunter et al., 2019; Shammas, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). Several studies have shown students' involvement in ethnic or race-specific student organizations increased their sense of belonging (e.g., DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Samura, 2016). Shammas (2015) addressed many of these aspects of identity in their study about Arab and Muslim students creating their own campus communities. However, because Arab American and Muslim American students are not as well integrated into campus communities, they are left to form ethnic and religious groups for themselves to simulate a sense of connectedness to the campus (Shammas, 2015). There is a positive relationship between campus friendships and a sense of belonging (Shammas, 2015). A strong sense of ethnic identity helped both Arab students feel more comfortable making friends with their same ethnic identities and enhanced social integration within the campus community (Shammas, 2015). Related, Museus et al. (2017) found that cultural familiarity, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, proactive philosophies, and holistic support were all positively associated with students' sense of belonging. Proactive philosophies are what drive institutional agents, like faculty and staff, to extend their efforts beyond making information, opportunities, and support available to students to ensure that students know how to use them and get the most out of them (Museus et al., 2017). Holistic support is the extent to which students have access to one faculty or staff member who provides them with information and support and provides them referrals to resources or contacts they may need (Museus et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology is a human science that explores the human world as we find it and wishes to meet human beings where they are naturally engaged in their worlds (van Manen, 1997). As individuals reflect, their experiences are seen more clearly, and the meanings expand. *Essence* is the ultimate understanding of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Through phenomenology, researchers gain a better understanding of social phenomena through participants' perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). One should explore the everyday meaning as it stands and not with prior meanings of systems that are in place (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenological research is an intimate approach to research and requires researchers to pursue their work with care and to have a desire to uncover meaning. To do so, one must question the world in which they live and experience it and engage with one's assumptions of personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs, views, and theories (van Manen, 2014). For example, in the context of this larger study, I wondered, *how do Arab American college students experience the world, and in particular, U.S. higher education?* Phenomenologists must investigate, probe, reflect, analyze, and interrogate experiences and prepare themselves to live with the uncertainty, frustration, and risk required for genuine insights (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenologists must balance unraveling an experience while immersing themselves in the moment and process.

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Because humans experience the world through a unique lens and the context of their own lived experiences, participants may have differing opinions about what it means to "be Arab American" especially related to their salient identities and experiences. Using phenomenology allows us to examine Arab American college students' experiences through multiple perspectives and find common experiences—the *essence* of their experience—among the participants. Through reflection, phenomenology allows us to discover the meaning of lived experiences within a specific social context (Crotty et al., 1996; Crotty, 1998; van Manen, 2017). This study sought to explore the essence of how Arab American college students make meaning of their sense of belonging while in college, and particular findings through the lens of involvement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories one uses to support and inform their research is its conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Robson, 2011). Maxwell (2013) suggested that conceptual frameworks inform one's research design, influencing how they choose their overall research goals, research questions, and methods used, and helps to identify potential validity threats to one's findings. When building a conceptual framework, researchers borrow from existing theories and research to craft something relevant to their study (Maxwell, 2013).

First, sense of belonging as a basic human need expands on belongingness in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). It is also important to recognize that Maslow based belongingness on Indigenous values and beliefs (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). Maslow spent time with the Blackfoot people and took what he learned from them—their culture, values, and beliefs—to form this hierarchy of needs without acknowledging their contributions (Blood & Heavyhead, 2007; Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020). Thus, the very foundations of belonging research were taken from Indigenous values and beliefs. Belongingness serves as the starting point for Strayhorn's work on sense of belonging in higher education settings. Belonging is a basic need for college students as they must feel a sense of connectedness, membership, and inclusion at their institutions, and that it leads to positive outcomes like happiness, wellbeing, achievement, and optimal functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Jonier, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) includes seven core elements to sense of belonging, saying it:

- Is a universal, basic human need;
- Is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior;
- Is given importance based on context, time, and factors;
- Is related to mattering;
- Is influenced by one's identity;
- Leads to positive outcomes and success; and
- Must be satisfied as conditions change (p. 30).

I used Strayhorn's (2019) core elements of belonging as a conceptual framework to examine how Arab American college students accomplish a sense of belonging, and while involved in leadership and campus activities specifically. During the data analysis process, I used the core elements as foundational themes and priori codes, or codes that were developed before examining interview transcripts (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). I, then, found more themes that arose in the thematizing process. The core elements influenced the building of the research and interview questions. Because the participants have a specific racial and ethnic identity, I placed particular focus on exploring how identities affect belonging in college. Using this lens as a guide through the research process helped to unravel meaning along the way. For example, there is a specific interview question about participants and their relationships with others on-campus as a starting point for exploring their relationships with others at their institutions and the impact these relationships may have (e.g., see Vaccaro et al., 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007).

When exploring positive outcomes and success, it is important to understand what this means to the participant. Strayhorn (2019) mentioned student engagement, achievement, wellbeing, happiness, and when they are optimally functioning in a specific domain or context as positive outcomes and success. This includes leadership and involvement in campus activities. Students' sense of belonging shifts as they progress through college (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore,

participants' sense of belonging may fluctuate. When analyzing the data, I examined if there were significant differences between the participants and their classification. This conceptual framework provided for a better understanding of how Arab American college students developed a sense of belonging and what major elements affect them.

METHODS

Drawn from a larger study on the lived experiences of Arab American college students at one institution, this article illuminates two key findings related to Arab American students' experiences with organizations and involvement. Using a phenomenological research approach allows researchers the freedom of scholarly nonconformity, challenging the rigidity of the research process and prioritizing the act of unraveling the essence of lived experiences without having to conform to strict research processes found in other methodologies (Mobley, 2019). This flexibility allows for the essence of phenomena to emerge more naturally (Groenewald, 2004).

With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from [institution], recruitment flyers were sent to various institutional listservs, including academic advisors and student affairs professionals to share with students and student organizations. As participants signed up and participated, I relied on snowball sampling to help gain more participants as needed (Patton, 2002). Two 60-minute semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to gather a better understanding of the participants' experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, I spent time reflecting on what resonated and why both in writing and through conversation. I explored what I was feeling and the roots of why I might be feeling that way (Groenewald, 2004). Throughout, I debriefed with colleagues about these experiences including any triggers or feelings of uneasiness that came up in addition to the moments of validation and joy (Groenewald, 2004). Participants selected or were provided a pseudonym and all data collected was de-identified and associated only with the pseudonym. Thematizing was the primary data analysis process. Thematizing can be used to code data holistically (Van Manen, 1997). Holistic coding allows researchers to provide comprehensive descriptions of participants' lived experiences by surfacing overall themes (van Manen, 1997). In addition, to further the analysis process, following Hycner's (1985) guidelines for phenomenological analysis were applied while analyzing the recordings and transcriptions.

In sum, twelve undergraduate students participated in this study (see Table 1). All participants self-identified as Arab Americans. Out of the 12 participants, two individuals identified themselves as men and ten identified themselves as women. Participants held majors in natural sciences, liberal arts, engineering, architecture, and social work. Their generational status reflects whether one or both of their parents immigrated to the United States. Their ancestral countries of origin included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Syria.

Table 1. *Participant Profiles*

Pseudonym	**Race**	**Generational Status**	**Ancestral Origin**
Amira	Arab	Both parents	Lebanon
Basmah	Arab	Both parents	Lebanon, Palestine, Syria
Evangeline	Arab	One parent	Palestine
Faye	Arab	Both parents	Iraq
Jasmine	Arab & White	Both parents	Syria
Joha	Arab & White	One parent	Algeria
Kate	Arab & White	One parent	Lebanon
Layla	Arab	Both parents	Lebanon, Palestine
Mark	Arab & White	One parent	Palestine
Sara	Arab	Both parents	Iraq, Syria
Suroor	Arab	Both parents	Egypt
Zainab	Arab	Both parents	Morocco

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Positionality

In tandem with these methods, an understanding of author positionality is both helpful and relevant here. I am a multiracial woman who strongly identifies with my Arab roots. I was born in the United States and identify as Arab American. As a student, I had a difficult time establishing my sense of belonging, often feeling alone, isolated, invisible, and othered. It was difficult to connect with other Arab Americans on campus because of our different cultural backgrounds. I managed to find other Students of Color to connect with in a few of my classes. I regularly hide my cultural identity from others hoping to avoid questions and the mentally taxing efforts required to educate others about the identities I carry. It was difficult for me to find spaces on campus where I belonged and felt comfortable being my authentic self.

While in academia I have been a student, student-facing staff member, administrator, and faculty member. It became my goal to create spaces and programs for marginalized students to belong, including Arab Americans. I established and facilitated multiple student leadership programs that placed a sense of belonging at the core of their designs and implementation. This research is personal to me because of the identities I carry and the experiences I have had and continue to have. I am aware that I am an insider to participants because of the identities I carry. I write this paper acknowledging the important intersection of Arab American students' experiences with student involvement and leadership; at the same time, I acknowledge that research involving an intersection such as this may come with more questions than answers - true to the form of phenomenological approach that guided this study.

Limitations

This study addresses needed literature around understanding the lived experience of Arab American college students, and through the lens of their experiences with campus activities and leadership. Still, there were a few limitations within this study. First, all twelve participants were students from the same institution. The study specifically focused on how Arab American college students at this institution experienced a sense of belonging. The institution has over 40,000 undergraduate students and is a historically white university in the South. Thus, participants may not be representative of Arab American college students across the United States. Next, there are some limitations around how I use language and identity. For example, I use Arab American as a pan-ethnic term, which generalizes the wide range of identities found within this group. Additionally, there were only two students who identified as men, one who identified as Queer, and none who identified as non-binary or transgender; all participants were undergraduate students. Arab American graduate students may differ in how they experience a sense of belonging. Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may have limited the study's findings as well. For example, since the university represented in this study employed remote learning from March 2020 through September 2021 with some opting to continue virtual learning through December 2021, some participants may have limited in-person university experiences.

THEMES

Individuals are motivated by their need to belong and will seek out opportunities to fulfill their belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Strayhorn (2019) suggested that this can affect students' academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. This was shown by the participants as they often sought out ways to connect with others. This included exploring campus activities–and student organizations specifically–attending events and speaking to peers in the classroom. Participants often explored student organizations that were related to their Arab American identity or their interests, both academic and political. With this in mind, the following two subthemes illuminate participants' experiences with *identity affirmation and identity conflict within organizations.*

Identity Affirmation Within Organizations

Largely, students in this study found identity affirmations through their organizational involvement. When beginning their journeys at their university, all participants tried joining the [Arab Student Organization] (ASO) in hopes of connecting with other Arab college students. For instance, Evangeline shared that ASO meetings are

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the only formal spaces where she could find other Arab college students. She elaborated:

> I feel like the only place that I've really experienced people that are like me are when I go to the [ASO] meetings. When I don't go to those meetings or when I'm not in that community, I guess it is still pretty isolating…I thought there was gonna be more [Arabs] than there was in college.

Outside of ASO, Evangeline felt isolated, showing the importance of having organizations accessible that are related to one's identity. Other participants also joined ASO while some pursued other identity-based student organizations where they felt a stronger sense of connection. For instance, multiple participants were part of [Palestinian Unity Group] (PUG), an organization that supported both their Arab identity and political beliefs. Amira joined PUG and when at their meetings she felt like she belonged. Amira shared:

> [PUG] the Palestinian um group, it is really nice because they always like sometimes put on a Dabke class and that kind of stuff. And every time, I get started with the Dabke it always makes me just like flashback of home… just being in their meetings is always really nice, because everywhere you turn you like, you ask someone where they're from, and they're all Arabs and it's just nice to kind of share your little experiences, and just a little bit about yourself and stuff.

Connecting with other students who had similar lived experiences created spaces where participants felt comfortable, made connections with their peers and explored their culture. Similarly, students who participated in the [Sakena Hassan Arabic Program], which is composed of Arabs and non-Arabs, felt a strong connection and ability to be their authentic selves, which heightened their sense of belonging. This was likely due to the nature of the program and how it was a designated space for individuals to learn more about Arab culture.

For some participants, leadership roles materialized in the form of academic leadership, in which some found leadership and activities in classroom and academic units. For example, Zainab shared her experience of finding a sense of belonging on campus when she declared her major and took on a teaching assistant (TA) leadership role.

> Honestly, I feel like my whole experience has been like not belonging. Honestly. Maybe like last year, my senior year, I feel like I belong like in the [Science] Department. In the beginning I felt like I belonged nowhere honestly… But eventually, once I started getting into classes and understood more. And also, I became a TA for [science] classes. So that's what I really felt like okay "I'm not that I'm not a stranger to this."

Similar to Zainab, other participants mentioned that having academic leadership roles and involvement in student organizations increased their sense of belonging at the university. Often, the leadership roles were within academic spaces such as being an academic tutor, teaching assistant, or officer in an academic student organization. Participants were drawn to student organizations that connected them to their Arab identity, academics, and political beliefs.

Identity Conflict Within Organizations

With so few Arab-focused student organizations to join, each participant tried joining ASO. They had mixed experiences with the association and as a result, several participants' sense of belonging was decreased because they did not feel Arab enough or like they could truly be themselves. For instance, some participants constantly questioned their Arab identity and whether they were Arab enough while attending Arab student organization events.

Given the unique variations of encounters alongside the Arab American experience, as well as within the community itself, it was difficult for participants to find a sense of belonging inside organizations related to their racial and ethnic identity. This circumstance held especially true when most members were Arab and not necessarily Arab American. However, Faye shared that her sense of belonging in the ASO conflicts with her identity and that she sometimes feels disconnected from her peers, unable to meet their expectations.

> But on campus biggest org that has that has anything to do with being an Arab student is [ASO], and I've been to our student association meetings. And I was so so sorely disappointed I felt like I felt like it. I wasn't gonna gain anything. Umm it's yeah, that like it's so weird the how it worked out because that was when I felt the most disconnected from [institution] students is when I went to an [ASO] meeting.

Faye, like other participants, found it difficult to belong in Arab-specific student organizations. She felt like, al-

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though these organizations were for Arab and Arab American students, participants often separated their Arab and American identities, prioritizing their American identity. This prioritization influences the way others articulate their Arab identity in everyday life and speech, thereby rendering the Arab identity superficial and detached as compared to the American identity. She shared wanting to find spaces where she could proudly be Arab American, reconnect with her Arabness, and meet other Arab students. However, with the dearth of spaces where she feels this sense of belonging, Faye found ways to explore and share her Arab American identity with non-Arab peers.

Although Mark found himself somewhat estranged from his Arab identity, he tried to find an Arab student organization to join when starting at the university. In his struggle to find an Arab student organization on campus that made him feel like he fit in, he returned to the environment cultivated in his major. Similarly, Suroor tried to find places and organizations on campus where she felt like she belonged and was still searching for the right place. She found it difficult to find an organization where she related to other participants, with similar shared experiences. She shared:

> Also, there is the [ASO] which I've been trying to go to those. I've gone to a couple [ASO] events. I don't know if I fully feel like I belong with them but just kind of trying to try different things and make a mark in different spaces makes me feel like if I left tomorrow, I might miss some things.

Suroor continued exploring her Arab American identity and searched for other Arab Americans with similar experiences to connect with. She thought finding peers with similar backgrounds would help her understand and embrace her Arab American identity in a more meaningful way.

DISCUSSION

Participants wanted to belong and because of this, they were motivated to find ways to connect with others both on and off campus, and specifically through student organization involvement. Thus, this was actualized through identity affirmation and conflict found in student involvement as a form of campus activities. Participants found limited campus communities dedicated to the Arab American identity. Participants also expressed that because there was a lack of university-sponsored events related to the Arab identity, they created their own events to connect with each other and to feel a sense of connection. This reflects Shammas' (2015) findings that Arab American students are not as well integrated into campus communities as other students and as a result are left to form their own group(s) to create a sense of connectedness to their campuses. This also highlights some similarities between Arab American and Latinx college students' experiences. Like Latinx students (e.g., see Nuñez, 2009), participants in this study sought out opportunities to connect with others on campus and in their communities. Participants expressed the important role of social events held by the ASO and how these were the only events on campus dedicated to their identity.

Participants also shared that if they could not find communities on campus where they belonged, they then turned to seeking communities off campus. For those who sought communities off campus, they expressed having limited connections to their institution and that they limited their time on campus. Thus, Arab American college students' desire to belong was a sufficient motivation for them to seek out community. Unfortunately, when these Arab American college students did not find organized communities at their institution, they looked elsewhere, and their campus engagement lessened. This suggests that some Arab American college students lack college communities where they belong. This disconnect reiterates the importance that students from diverse backgrounds, including Arab American college students, need to have additional opportunities to engage with one another and campus communities in meaningful ways. Otherwise, they face a lack of belonging at their institutions (DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Hunter et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2009; Van Horne et al., 2018).

Several scholars have argued that students' involvement in ethnic or race-specific student organizations can increase their sense of belonging particularly for Students of Color (e.g., DeLaRosby & Jun, 2017; Garcia, 2019; Samura, 2016). At the participants' institution in this study, there were only four groups that specifically related to the Arab identity despite their state being among the largest with the highest population of Arabs in the United States (Yalla Count Me In!, 2019). Connecting with other students who have similar lived experiences

created spaces where participants felt comfortable, making connections with their peers and exploring their culture (e.g., joining ASO, PUG, and the Sakena Hassan Arabic Program). This reflects how racially and ethnically diverse students face additional stressors as they navigate the varying expectations and norms of their college communities and their racial and ethnic identity and culture (Nasir & Saxe, 2003).

Knowing that sense of belonging motivates students to seek out opportunities to fulfill their needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), student activities and involvement can be a way students become closer to both their institution and their identity/ies. Strayhorn (2019) suggested that these motives can affect students' academic performance and involvement in extracurricular activities. This was shown by the participants as they often sought out ways to connect with others. This included exploring student organizations, attending events, and speaking to peers in the classroom. Participants often explored student organizations that were related to their Arab American identity or their interests, both academic and political. Unlike Nuñez's (2009) findings on Latinx students, participants in this study did not disclose that campus hostility factored into their behavior in seeking opportunities to connect with others. This was shown by participants as they all attempted to join student organizations within their first year at their university, hoping to find friends. In addition, when participants spoke about these positive experiences and their sense of belonging, they were excited, joyful, and happy with their experiences reflecting that students' sense of belonging is impacted by positive outcomes such as achievement, engagement, and well-being (Hausmann et al., 2007). Suggesting that Arab American college students want to belong, and this need motivates their behaviors resulting in positive outcomes such as increased involvement and academic success. When Arab American college students feel that they belong, it provides institutions with engaged students who are likely to perform stronger academically and potentially increase retention and four-year graduation rates.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With identity affirmation and conflict in mind, it is imperative that higher education and student affairs practitioners and scholars consider the intersection of identity and involvement at this juncture. I offer several recommendations for practice and research regarding Arab American college students and their engagement with campus activities and student organizations specifically.

Recommendations for Practice

First, practitioners should work to understand the different needs of Arab international and Arab American students, as well as the complexity of their relationships–or lack thereof–with one another. Student activities and involvement offices, for example, can tailor services to provide more support for student groups across identities, and with a mindfulness that although Arab students may share a racial category, their cultural experiences and expectations differ. While this can be done in student organization spaces, it can also be through campus events and student body-wide programming. For example, student affairs programmers can increase the overall Arab American racial and ethnic representation at events via food, music, speakers, and cultural highlights. Given many Arab American students in this study felt like they belonged when with other student of color communities, student involvement spaces can create and provide opportunities for cross-racial socialization, friendship, and more.

Recommendations for Research

Beyond these practical considerations, additional research about Arab American college students and their overall student experience is needed to help improve university services, classroom experiences, and their overall sense of belonging. This study focused on the undergraduate experience in student involvement and organizations specifically; future research can be done to further explore the experiences of Arab American graduate students in campus activities and organizations. Graduate students may experience belonging differently than undergraduates as they are in different developmental stages, possess varying expectations, and are viewed differently than undergraduate students. Perhaps this is also a unique area where support for graduate students is needed differently, especially in the areas of community across generations and life spans (e.g., graduate students with children, spouses, etc.).

Additional research related to the understanding of the Arab identity and how it relates to enoughness is needed. Participants' feelings of enoughness varied. Gaining a better understanding of what directly impacts their feelings of enoughness could improve higher education services, curricula, and organizations. Through additional qualitative research, scholars can examine what enoughness means to Arab American college students, when they experience feeling enough, and how it affects their overall belonging. Research can be conducted to examine how Arab college students' families and communities affect their experiences navigating their identities (e.g., perhaps students feel more or less drawn to certain organizations due to familial expectations). This study suggests some participants searched for community on campus and when they were unable to find it, they looked elsewhere for community and belonging. Creating a sense of belonging on campus will aid Arab American college students' feelings of mattering, and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Arab American college students, how they achieve a sense of belonging, and the role student involvement and leadership play in these experiences. Participants shared their experiences navigating their racial and ethnic identity while seeking a sense of belonging. While searching for opportunities to connect with their peers in student organizations related to their Arab American identity, at times participants were excluded. These experiences left them feeling invisible, othered, and isolated. Participants remained resilient, resourceful, and eager to belong, pushing them to seek opportunities to belong both on and off campus. Student leadership opportunities helped participants feel like they mattered, belonged, and gave them a sense of connection to their peers and institutions. It would behoove higher education professionals to ensure there are opportunities where Arab American college students can take on leadership roles and actively engage with their peers and institutions.

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