

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ISLAMIC HIGHER LEARNING
INSTITUTIONS IN OBTAINING ACCREDITATION

by

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To my mother and father

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ISLAMIC HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN OBTAINING ACCREDITATION

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The Muslim population is increasing in the U.S. and is expected to be the second largest religious group shortly. The demand for learning Islamic studies and Arabic by Muslims and non-Muslims was behind the formation of several Islamic colleges and universities. Although many Islamic higher learning institutions have been operating in recent years to serve Muslim and non-Muslim students, only one has obtained accreditation. The primary goal of this study was to explore the challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in obtaining accreditation.

This study adopted the case study approach and depended on three data tools: interviews, surveys, and documents collected from three Islamic higher learning institutions. Three participants participated in the interviews, and nineteen responded to the survey. Many documents were also collected from three institutions, allowing the researcher to triangulate the data to achieve better and more accurate results. The results revealed several challenges Islamic colleges and universities face in obtaining accreditation. Among the challenges were financial constraints, retaining faculty, the absence of support by the Muslim community, accommodating students' needs, and

misperception of Islam and Islamic Institutions. However, biases toward Islamic institutions were denied neither by the accrediting agencies nor by others.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There is a long tradition in the U.S. of having religiously affiliated higher educational institutions. The goal of training ministers to educate the communities about Protestantism was behind founding the land's early religious institutions (Thelin, 2019). Harvard, the oldest college in the nation, along with other early colleges that were established in the time of colonial era, were founded by Christian churches (Theline, 2019). Then higher institutions evolved into private, public, and other religious affiliations such as Catholic, Jewish, and other minority institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics IPED's database (NCES, 2021), the number of post-secondaries religiously affiliated in the United States is 866, mostly Christian-affiliated.

Statistics collected by the U.S Religion Census in 2020 indicated that 4.45 million Muslims live in the U.S. (USRC, 2020). Pew Research Center claimed that Muslims are expected to increase by 2040, making Muslims the second-largest religious group after Christians (Pew, 2018). Public interest in studying the Arabic language and the religion of Islam has increased since the 9/11 terrorist attack of 2001. Hence, there have been growing demands for Islamic colleges and universities to educate students, both Muslims and non-Muslims, on all aspects of Islamic knowledge like those of other religiously affiliated universities and colleges.

Accreditation granted to a higher learning institution by accrediting U.S. agencies ensures that an institution meets acceptable quality levels and is a legitimate higher

institution for learning. Accredited colleges and universities enjoy many benefits over non-accredited ones, such as federal and state financial aid to their students and institutions. In addition, their students can transfer to other higher education institutions, and the public trust that their graduates receive a quality education.

In recent years, there have been several Islamic higher learning institutions operating. The main objectives of those institutions are to respond to public and market's needs by educating Muslims and non-Muslim students about the Quran, Arabic language, Islamic Jurisprudence, the History of Islam, and Muslim traditions. Unfortunately, only one of those Islamic institutions successfully achieved accreditation from authorized accrediting agencies in the U.S. Zaytuna College, with a 50-student body and 15 faculty in California, has been the only exception that managed to get accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). WASC is one of the academic accrediting agencies that oversee public and private colleges and universities in the U.S. (Washington, 2015). This research will explore the challenges that are faced by Muslim-affiliated institutions to be accredited in the US.

Background and Context

To serve the purpose of this research, I need to identify and define some recurring key terms and give background knowledge about some related topics.

Accreditation

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) defined accreditation as “a review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs. In the United States, accreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, and the press know that an institution or program provides quality education" (CHEA, 2021). In

the U.S, 19 accrediting organizations were approved by CHEA and the Department of Education to grant regional and national accreditation to colleges and universities (CHEA, 2021). Therefore, we can say that an accredited college or university is the higher education institution that was able to get accreditation from one of the 19 accrediting organizations.

According to the Department of Education (2022), accreditation is a non-obligatory, nongovernmental process that involves a rigorous external review of a college or university's ability to provide the minimum standards of quality and integrity regarding academics, administration, and related services. Further, the accreditation process involves a comprehensive review of a school's mission, faculty qualifications, and curricula. Moreover, it includes self-evaluations, peer reviews, committee reviews, and the development of in-depth strategic plans. Finally, accreditation ensures that students learn material most relevant to their field of study, preparing them to be influential community members.

The objective of accreditation is to create a set of standards for all higher education institutions to perform at their best. Consequently, accreditation aims to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions and degree programs to build public trust and confidence. When an institution or degree program is accredited, students can gauge the institution's overall quality.

Cole (2006) explored one cultural aspect dominating the US Accrediting agencies. In his research, Cole compared curricula of tribal, Black, and mainstream colleges. Further, he analyzed several courses that focused on African and Indian cultures. The study findings revealed that tribal colleges offer nearly ten times as many

“ethnocentric” courses as mainstream colleges. These findings raise the concern for accrediting authorities if these colleges have separate independent identities from their tribes and are considered legitimate knowledge institutions. In addition, the study revealed that courses in private Black colleges offered 15% more and in publicly controlled ones offered 73% fewer afro-centric courses compared with mainstream colleges (Cole, 2006).

Minority-Serving Institutions

According to Gasman et al (2008), *Minority-Serving Institution* (MSI) is a term that has been only used recently in the higher education field; they stated:

The term Minority-serving institution (MSI) was developed only in the last decade to describe those institutions serving large numbers of minority students. These include those designated by the government as serving particular groups who have been historically discriminated against and who therefore are eligible for additional government funding. (p. 273-274)

Most definitions for MSIs are based on historical or enrollment criteria. The U.S. Department of Education defines MSIs based on legislation and the percentage of minority undergraduate enrolment (Doed, 2021). Doed (2007 defined MSIs according to student enrollment criteria as "institutions that enroll at least 25 percent of a specific minority group are designated as "minority-serving" for that group” p. 5. MSIs are eligible for federal and private funding based on specific eligibility criteria determined by the funding agency. Federal funding, however, is provided directly to some MSIs under Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Gasman et al, 2008).

Many studies explored the cultures of early higher learning institutions and the emergence of MSIs. Thelin (2019) argued that during the time of colonies, higher education institutions served White Christian students, specifically Protestants, the predominant religion. Before the civil war, there were only three higher education institutions to serve Black students, including the Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the first Black higher education institution.

According to the U.S federal government, MSIs include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs).

The oldest MSIs are HBCUs that emerged after the civil war to educate Black students about religion and train them with various skills (John & Stage, 2014). Later, the number of HBCUs increased in the late 19th century due to the segregation policies that prevented Black students from attending higher education institutions that aimed to educate White students. According to the Department of Interior (2020), there are over 102 HBCUs, 274 HSIs, and 35 TCUs.

Religious-Affiliated Institutions

Religion played a central role in the early history of Higher education institutions in the nation. Kohlbrenner (1961) argued that Christianity dominated the scene of the early higher learning institutions whether the school was intended to be a divinity or not. They all emphasized scriptural literacy, Christian moral principles, salvation through Jesus Christ, and a biblical worldview. Harvard, the first higher education institution in the land, which was intended to be for general education, based its teaching on the Christian

concept and teaching in addition to classical education. Kohlbrenner noted that Harvard's mission statement was:

Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17, 3. and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning" (p. 46).

Harvard's mission statement indicated how Christianity dominated the culture of higher education institutions and their purpose.

The hegemony of the Christian faith was apparent in the early established colleges and universities. Guthrie (2020) stated that the nine colonial colleges and most colleges founded before the U.S. Civil War were religiously affiliated. They resulted from the Christian faith hegemony in the colonial era through the antebellum period (1620– 1860) and continued through the first two decades of the 20th century. Consequently, most institutions founded before the Civil War were religiously affiliated (Guthrie, 2020). Religiously affiliated institutions constitute today nearly one-sixth of all colleges and universities in the United States. What religiously affiliated institutions hold in common is an interest in having their religious identities reflected in their institutions, whether in their cultures, curricula, or policies (Guthrie, 2020)

Theoretical Framework

Considering my intended investigation into the challenges that face Islamic colleges and universities in being accredited, a theory is needed to develop a lens for exploring my research questions. Moreover, in studying the challenges that Islamic colleges and universities face in obtaining accreditation, I was interested in better

understanding the theoretical frameworks that have attempted to explain and overcome those challenges. In my research, I identified two main theories that helped me provide a framework for my study.

The first theory which I employed in my research is Critical Theory. Critical Theory emphasizes the reflective assessment and critique of society and culture by applying social sciences and humanities knowledge. It has been a significant influence in the fields of sociological and political theory. Key concepts in critical theory include the critique of ideology, the concept of hegemony, and the social construction of reality. Critical theorists are interested in how power and domination are maintained and resisted, and they often seek to apply their ideas to social and political activism. Horkheimer (1982) argued that one main objective of Critical Theory is “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” p. 244.

Furthermore, Critical Theory explains and questions existing power structures, social norms, and ideologies to better understand social issues, inequality, and injustice. Moreover, Critical Theory focuses on the role of schools in reproducing social inequalities and how economic and political forces shape the education system. In addition, Critical Theory encourages alternative perspectives and voices often marginalized or excluded, which fits the nature of my research and could be applied to it.

The second theory I employed in my research is Imagined Community. Imagined Community focuses on the social construction of national identity and how people perceive themselves as part of a larger community that shares common symbols and narratives even though they do not know each other. Moreover, the concept of an "imagined community" highlights the role of cultural and historical factors in shaping

national identity. According to Anderson (2016), the nation is an "imagined political community" that is imagined because it is both limited and sovereign. It is limited in that it consists of a specific group of people who share a common language, culture, and history, and it is sovereign in that it is governed by its own laws and institutions. Furthermore, the concept of an "imagined community" also suggests that the bonds of national identity are not fixed or static, but rather are constantly being negotiated and reinterpreted using shared symbols and cultural practices. This dynamic process of nation-building involves the construction and reconstruction of national identity through various forms of media and cultural expression (Anderson, 2016).

The Muslim communities in the United States fit the concept of Imagined Communities talked about by Anderson. Moreover, Imagined Community theory focuses on how a community may manifest itself in different social, cultural, or political contexts and how it is shaped by them, as is the case with the Muslim communities in the United States. Therefore, I believe Imagined Community theory is a good fit for my research along with Critical Theory.

Research Question

There is an increasing demand by Muslims and non-Muslims in the U.S. for accredited Islamic higher learning institutions. Even though many Islamic colleges and universities are operating, only one of them managed to obtain accreditation. This research explored the challenges Islamic colleges and universities face in obtaining accreditation. Therefore, this study addressed the following research question: What are the unique challenges Islamic higher-learning institutions face in obtaining accreditation?

Significance

The demand for Islamic colleges and universities to be accredited is increasing, driven by the institutions themselves, their students, and those interested in learning about Islam. Unfortunately, no research has been conducted on Islamic colleges and accreditation. Hence, this type of research is beneficial for Islamic colleges and universities that seek accreditation. Further, this research helps understand the challenges faced by religious institutions and MSIs in obtaining accreditation.

Moreover, this research also helps Minority religious and non-religious communities understand the cultures of MSIs and the accreditation organizations and helps better understand the factors that increase the chances of establishing indigenous minority higher learning institutions. Additionally, this type of research helps understand a new category of the Muslim minority that is added to MSIs. Lastly, this research is a valuable addition to higher education in general.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the literature that includes information on several topics related to the challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in being accredited. The peer literature I will review for this chapter will focus on the following issues: understanding Accreditation and its process, minority-serving institutions, Muslim students and the problem of discrimination and marginalization, and religion and US higher learning institutions.

Accreditation

Accreditation is commonly dealt with in peer review research from a historical and practical perspective, not an empirical one. Further, higher education journals and books focused on the history of accreditation and the practical issues of it and its process rather than as a predictor of outcomes of interest to higher learning institutions (Alstete, 2004). However, even the research focused on the history and practice of accreditation is still considered a minimal amount compared to other fields.

Accreditation has always been present in the history of higher education. Seldon (1960) explored the history of accreditation and the struggle for its standards in higher education. Seldon (1960) noted many misconceptions and misunderstandings about the accreditation by administrative officers in colleges and universities due to the rapid changes in their positions. Moreover, Seldon argued that only a tiny portion of the executive and faculty involved in the accreditation activities know what accreditation is meant. Seldon (1960) defined accrediting as: “Basically, accrediting is the process

whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or university, or a program of study as having met certain predetermined qualifications or standards” (p. 6). From that definition, we understand that accreditation involves a process the college or university has to go through to be accredited, standards imposed by the accrediting agency that must be met, and the two types of accreditations- institution and program.

As for the first schools to set up accreditation standards, Seldon (1960) stated that the board of regents of the University of the State of New York takes the credit as the first accrediting agency formed in 1787. The board, which used to implement high standards on colleges in New York, was required to visit every college in the state once a year to oversee the implementation of standards and report to the legislature. In 1870-1871 the University of Michigan had adopted the German method of sending faculty to high schools to set standards and prepare them for the university. This method was adopted quickly by other middle states and later provided a basis for the practice of colleges and accreditation (Seldon, 1960).

To ensure academic quality to the satisfaction of all educational stakeholders, top executives of colleges and universities founded the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in 1996 as a formal entity to recognize accrediting organizations (CHEA, 2006). Eaton (2008), the President of CHEA, described CHEA as a “private, (nongovernmental) institutional membership organization that scrutinizes the capacity of accrediting bodies to assure and improve the academic quality of institutions and programs, based on CHEA standards” p. 23. This indicates that CHEA establishes the benchmarks for excellence that its member accrediting agencies must meet. These

members are then in charge of giving postsecondary programs or institutions accreditation status.

Today, there are 95 accrediting agencies recognized by CHEA and the US Department of Education (USDE) that focus on institutions and program accreditation. Further, among the accrediting organizations, there are six regional, five national faith-related, five national-career related, and one institution that focus on distance education, and the rest are programmatic accrediting organizations. However, the number of accrediting organizations changes either by withdrawing recognition from previously recognized members or adding new recognized members (CHEA, 2023).

CHEA six regional accreditation agencies cover the whole region of the United States that are responsible for higher learning institutions' accreditation at most public and private not-for-profit (and some for-profit) 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (Birittingham, 2009). The first regional association was the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, established in 1885 (CIHE, 2009), which includes the CIHE and the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions. Later, region accreditation agencies were formed, including the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (including its Commission on Higher Education, established in 1887; the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, established in 1895; the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (including its Higher Learning Commission), established in 1895; the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities established in 1917; and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (including the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities established in 1924

(Brittingham, 2009; Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2009). Most accreditation standards as we know them today were established initially by these organizations between 1950 and 1965 (Brittingham, 2009). Although the seven Agencies share the same goals and objectives, they differ in methods and strategies (Alstete, 2004).

CHEA (2006) stipulates that an organization must meet certain requirements to be recognized as an accrediting organization: a mission and scope that aligns with CHEA policy; non-governmental status; compliance with the requirement to accredit only legal-conferring higher education institutions; sound written policies; evaluation procedures that include self-evaluation and site visits; accreditation independence from parent entities; and completion of multiple accreditation reviews. Furthermore, the requirements set out by CHEA means for any institution that seeks accreditation the following: it must promote academic excellence, show responsibility, foster progress, use fair processes, exhibit ongoing practice evaluation, and have sufficient resources (CHEA, 2006). As a result, CHEA's responsibility is to identify an organization as an accrediting agency and guarantee that the agency complies with CHEA's accreditation requirements.

As for the main focus of the accrediting agencies, Gasman et al (2008) stated that regional accreditation agencies focus on measuring the quality of higher education at the postsecondary level. Moreover, regional accrediting agencies set up standards that higher learning institutions must meet to gain and maintain institutional accreditation.

Accreditation, however, according to (Gasman et al., 2008), serves as a “gatekeeper” to financial institutions and provides a buffer against political influence over postsecondary institutions. Further, only accredited higher learning institutions have the authority to award and accept federal and student aid. Moreover, private, and public sector employers

take the accreditation of an institution into account when making a hiring decision (Gasman et al., 2008). Therefore, accreditation is becoming a necessity to any higher learning institution.

Program accreditation deals with the academic programs within the colleges and universities, especially those that lead to professional training. Accreditation for those programs is granted in addition to the institution's accreditation, indicating that those programs meet the agency standards of quality. Engineering programs, for example, are accredited by ABET, and so other disciplines have their accreditation agencies (APA, 2022). Similar to institutions' accreditation, program accreditation should be reviewed periodically to ensure that the accredited program maintains its quality (APA, 2022). USdoed (2009) noted that accreditation is a voluntary process that relies on a peer-review method conducted by the federally recognized accrediting agencies where the federal government plays an oversight role only. The department explained:

The U.S. Department of Education does not accredit educational institutions and/or programs. However, the Department provides oversight over the postsecondary accreditation system through its review of all federally recognized accrediting agencies. The Department holds accrediting agencies accountable by ensuring that they enforce their accreditation standards effectively. Also, as a part of the Department's oversight roles, the Secretary of Education is required by law to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies that the Secretary determines to be reliable authorities as to the quality of education or training provided by the institutions of higher education and the higher education programs they accredit. The Secretary of Education also recognizes State agencies

for the approval of public postsecondary vocational education and nurse education (Para,1).

Annual dues mainly fund accreditation agencies' work from accredited institutions or by fees from those undergoing accreditation review processes (Eaton, 2009). There are four types of accreditations within the U.S. system of higher learning institutions, including regional, programmatic, faith-based, and private career accreditation (Eaton, 2009). In a nutshell, accreditation is a peer review process conducted by federally accrediting agencies on a post-secondary institution to ensure its quality of education. The education department plays an oversight role only in the accreditation process.

Religion and Post-Secondary institutions in the U.S.

There is a long tradition in the U.S. of having religiously affiliated higher educational institutions (HEIs). The goal of training ministers to educate the communities about Protestantism was behind the founding of the land's early religious institutions (Thelin, 2019). Harvard, the oldest college in the nation, and other early colleges established during the colonial era were founded by Christian churches (Theline, 2019). Ford (2017) argued that from the founding of the first college on North American shores in the early 17th century to the middle of the 19th century and beyond, the primary function of a college education was civilizational. Its purpose was the preservation and continuation of Christian civilization. The vehicle used for this purpose was the liberal arts college. A college education aimed not simply to spread knowledge but to produce knowledgeable and morally upright individuals (Ford, 2017, p. 562).

Furthermore, religion played a central role in shaping higher learning institutions in the early history of America. Thelin (2019) explained the influence of religion on the

higher education system in the early time of the new land. He argued that religion was central in shaping and subsidizing colleges and universities. Millions of dollars were poured into colleges and universities to carry out the vision of the Christians oriented donors. The donations that supported higher education were fueled by a hybrid doctrine that came to be known as the "gospel of wealth" and the philosophy of Dwight Moody's "stewardship of wealth," which linked the "good works" dimension of Protestantism and prosperity to the cause of supporting higher education. The best example to represent the influence of religion on higher education was in 1884, when wealthy business people from different states came together to provide an enormous endowment for founding the Catholic University of America (Thelin, 2019, p.113).

Higher institutions evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century, and a new model was presented through The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 (Ford, 2017). The new model was intended to serve America's material needs and political ambitions rather than its civilizational ones. The Morrill Land Grant Act provided government land to individual states to establish public universities committed to the "practical arts" of agriculture, engineering, and military science in addition to the liberal arts (Ford, 2017, p. 565). However, religious colleges and other minority-serving institutions continued to progress. In time, several colleges founded by various Protestant denominations (and some Catholic-founded HEIs) became increasingly secular in the curriculum and culture of the institution with the church-based origins more of a historical artifact than the driving force of the institution's mission. A small percentage of older (19th C) and 20th C colleges retained an explicit religious purpose (J.Nidiffer, personal communication, March 10, 2023). Today, according to the National Center for Education Statistics IPED's

database (NCES, 2021), the number of post-secondary religiously affiliated in the United States was over 900 in 2015 compared to the 5300+ total of HEIs (NCES, 2023). It was primarily Christian-affiliated and 26 Jewish-affiliated, with close to two million of students enrolled. Religious students find a haven for themselves in religious-affiliated schools. In addition, religious students feel more comfortable in religiously affiliated schools where they can develop ethical and moral values in line with their religious beliefs (Shuman, 2010, p. 9-10).

Colleges and Universities started to distance themselves from religion in the last two centuries. Jacobsen (2013) argued that during the era of the nineteenth and twentieth century, colleges and universities worked to keep religion out of the core curricula based on the assumption that religion is not regarded as a legitimate knowledge and has nothing to do with the goals of higher education. Although the vast majority of students were religiously oriented, colleges and universities tried their best to keep religion out of the class. However, for students who felt marginalized and discriminated against, they could find a safe haven in the newly emerged other religious minority colleges and universities (Jacobsen, 2013). The diversity of post-secondary institutions provides a good option for students of different religious backgrounds to choose the best environment that fits them best.

The story of the 20th C is parts of the 18th C – a few stayed religiously oriented; and 19th C, a few more Protestant colleges with a religious focus were founded, and Catholic HE was also started; and during the 20th C, a few more Protestants – mostly evangelical – were founded, and some Catholic HE, especially universities, became more

secular, while many small Catholic colleges stayed closer to their founding (J.Nidiffer, personal communication, March 10, 2023).

Religion and higher education need each other to prosper. Wells (2018) stated that religion and higher education shared a symbiotic relationship throughout history. Further, religion and higher education needed each other to survive when higher learning institutions emerged in the new world. The primary motivation behind the newly built post-secondary education institutions was to instill Christian morals and beliefs in the hearts and minds of the new world citizens. Then later in modern time, when the separation of church and state and secularism principles started to dominate societies, higher learning institutions abandoned religion to attract more students and thrive (Wells, 2018).

Muslim Students and the Issue of Discrimination and Marginalization

It is not possible to research any topic that concerns the Muslims in the west without discussing the issue of discrimination. The Muslim population in the US has been “racialized” throughout the history of the nation as other groups and classified as a social minority. This racialization process has increased dramatically since 2001. Serhan (2014) noted that “the notion of Muslims in America as a different or coherent group is a by-product of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It is a recent historical phenomenon that has been an imposition upon disparate segments of the native and immigrant population” (p. 29). Garner and Selod (2015) state that religion is “raced,” and Muslims are racialized as a group. They assert that while racialization is not the only lens to understand negative experiences of Muslims in the US or Europe, it is an essential lens for understanding how Muslims have been racialized. Historically, race has been derived

from a combination of physical and cultural characteristics; and for Muslims their racialization is due to a combination of social and historical factors. Garner and Selod (2015) explained:

Muslims have historically been one of these groups that experienced racism, as have other faith-based groups, most obviously Jews. Their racialization is accomplished not only by reference to religion but other aspects of culture such as physical appearance (included but not limited to dress). Muslims can be racialized, and the ways (plural) in which this occurs can be understood as constituting Islamophobia.

Islamophobia is therefore a specific form of racism targeting Muslims, and racialization is a concept that helps capture and understand how this works, in different ways at different times, and in different places (p. 12).

Islamophobia has become an essential concern for Muslims and an area of concern for non-Muslims in the US and the West. Moreover, Islamophobia needs to be addressed by policymakers and public opinions to help resolve it.

Moreover, Ahmadi and Harber (2020) explained that in the years following 9/11, young Muslims, South Asians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Arabs have reported that they often feel unsafe and unwelcome in their schools because of harassment and bullying related to their faith, national origin, or immigration status. Furthermore, the faith of Muslim has made them a target of unwarranted police scrutiny in the country and consequently criminalizes Muslims students in schools and college campuses across the nation (Ahmad & Harber, 2020).

Systematic oppression and academic freedom are areas of concern for Muslim higher-education students. Mac et al (2017) argued that systematic repression applied to students supporting Palestinian solidarity and rights could be seen nationwide. Further, Muslim students who support Palestinian rights as a human rights issue, for example, do so in an atmosphere fraught with fear of negative repercussions to their educational and work opportunities and the criminalization of their activism. According to Mac et al (2017),

Many young Muslim and Arab Americans worry about the real threat of vilification and intimidation if they publicly support Palestine and some distance themselves from a politics defined as 'radical,' which has become a dirty word associated with 'bad' Muslim and Arab subjects. (p. 108)

Stereotyping and negative sentiment toward Muslims is another factor that Muslim students encounter on campus. Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) found that Muslim students contend with the pressure of managing impressions caused by the prevailing stereotypes and negative sentiments about Islam and Muslims. They assert that Muslim students are forced to engage in an “identity-management process” to deal with these stereotypes. The researchers added that this identity-management process might become challenging and ultimately all-consuming while attending college. Consequently, Muslim students must devote time and energy to this process that could otherwise be devoted to their studies (Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). The waste of Muslim students' energy and time can negatively impact campus and higher education in general by not taking full benefits of their energy and time to advance the higher education sector.

Most campuses do not respect Muslim students' needs or accommodate them like others. Altieri (2017) stated that most universities provide chapels, chaplains, and other facilities for Christian students. However, very few universities offer the same for Muslim students. Furthermore, with the absence of prayer and ablution space, Muslim students who want to practice their faith in college attract negative attention. Moreover, most universities do not accommodate Muslim students respecting their adherence to dietary restrictions referred to as halal in which the food they eat should not contain pork, lard, alcohol, or related products (Altieri, 2017). Colleges and universities also do not accommodate Muslim students during their religious holidays or Ramadan- the month of fasting for Muslims in which they fast from dawn to sunset, by not keeping the dining room area open until evening for them to break their fast. (Altieri, 2017).

The issue of the *Hijab* is one of the most critical issues that face Muslim student women on campus. A woman who adopts the Islamic dress code and wears a headscarf or veil is called *Hijabis* or *Muhajabah*. Islamic law requires men and women to dress decently in public. For women, the modesty mandate includes covering their hair and wearing modest clothing in the presence of non-relatives. The style and custom of the *Hijab* depend on a person's culture and country of origin. Ali and Bagheri (2009) noted that "there is no one universally accepted definition of hijab in Islam, which is why women who choose to wear the hijab may look different depending on their nationality and culture" (p. 51).

Moreover, the environment for *Hijab* on campus harms Muslim students and their faith. Cole and Ahmadi (2003) explored the issue of Hijab on campus in a study conducted on a midwest college campus. The study revealed that some students stopped

wearing Hijab due to hostile reactions on campus. Moreover, students reported that after experiencing discrimination, they questioned their religious reasons for wearing the Hijab and opted to cease their veiling practice. They also stated that their classmates and professors perceived them as oppressed, conservative submissive, and anti-feminists; as a result, they felt alienated on campus. (Cole and Ahmadi, 2003).

Islamic education in the US

Islamic education in the US has gone through different stages since its beginning in the second quarter of the Twentieth century. According to Grewal and Coolidge (2013), the Nation of Islam (NOI) established the first Islamic pedagogical institutions in the US in 1930. The NOI is a proto-Islamic and American Black Nationalist movement founded in 1930 in Detroit, Michigan, by Wallace Fard Muhammad. Fard Muhammad, an itinerant minister, fused Christian, and Islamic doctrine with anti-Caucasian rhetoric (Berg, 2009). His community of followers would come to be known as the "Nation of Islam" (NOI). Islamic scholars denounce NOI for its racist ideologies and consider it "unislamic." In addition, Muslim scholars viewed the extreme glorification of Wallace Fard Muhammad and Elijah Muhammad as a form of idol worship. Under Elijah Muhammad's direction, who succeeded Wallace Fard Muhammad, the NOI established several US Islamic primary and secondary schools. Although these schools were not institutions of higher education, they were called the University of Islam.

Between the 1930s and the early 1970s, the schools of the University of Islam curriculum did not adhere to traditional Islamic doctrines but focused on Black Nationalist ideologies. After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son, Warith Deen Muhammad, disbanded the NOI and invited followers to convert to traditional

Sunni Islam. In 1977, an ideological and physical separation occurred in the University of Islam system, leading to a reorganization of the primary and secondary school systems. Some of the schools remained under the NOI's control, then under Louis Farrakhan's direction, while the rest became traditional Sunni Islamic primary and secondary schools. The Sunni Islamic schools were renamed the Sister Clara Muhammad Schools (SCMS) after Warith Deen Muhammad's mother, Clara. Today there are approximately 75 SCMS in the US (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013).

The 1980s marked a period of expansion for Islamic primary and secondary schools. During that time, immigrant populations established 85 percent of American Islamic schools. Although most Islamic schools in the US are Sunni, Shi'a primary and secondary schools were also established by the Shi'a community. The Islamic schools in the US were modeled after American public schools after incorporating the Arabic language and Islamic studies in their curriculum (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013).

Another model of Islamic learning institution is known as “madrasa”- the place for learning. Grewal and Coolidge (2013) stated that there are very few madrasas in the US. The longest-running madrasas in the US are the Institute of Islamic Education (IIE) in Chicago and the Darul-Uloom Al Madania (DUM) in Buffalo, New York, founded in 1989 and 1992, respectively. Both are products of the Deobandi movement,¹⁹ with curricula focused on memorizing the Quran and classical Islamic disciplines. Students who attend madrasas train to become Hafiz- memorizers of the Quran. According to Grewal and Coolidge (2013), most American madrasa students are children of South Asian descent. Unlike Islamic K–12 schools, which are coeducational, strict gender segregation is enforced in the madrasas. Most of the madrasa curriculum is focused on

traditional Islamic curriculum and pedagogy, and many students supplement their Islamic education with correspondence courses or General Education Diplomas (GED).

Although many Muslim schools have spread across the US recently, a tiny percentage of Muslim families send their children to them. Grewal and Coolidge (2013) estimated that only four percent of Muslim American youth attend Islamic schools full-time. The vast majority of American Muslim families incline to send their children to non-Islamic schools out of conviction that the non-Islamic schools have a better academic standard in non-Islamic sciences. However, Muslim families supplement their children's traditional education with part-time religious instruction in the form of Islamic Sunday schools, private tutors, or religious summer camps.

Islamic Studies in US Colleges and Universities

The history of Islamic studies in American colleges and universities tells us that there was very limited existence for this type of studies at American universities before the 1960s. Douglas and Dunn (2013) stated that as a result of the absence of Islamic and middle eastern studies at US colleges and universities before the 1960s, primary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers entered the profession without a systematic knowledge of these regions or cultures. Consequently, the teachers lack the knowledge and expertise to teach their American students the topic of Islam and culture and the region of the Middle East. Moreover, most studies American colleges and universities used to focus on were Greek, Roman, and European studies (Douglas and Dunn, 2013).

Misrepresentation of Islamic studies is shaping the American higher learning institutions. Douglas and Dunn (2013) argued that since most of the information Americans had on the region of Middle East and Islam came from television, films,

advertising, and print journalism, “stereotypes and misrepresentation of Islam have been deeply ingrained in American culture. Just as the legacy of slavery has shaped popular images of Africa as a continent of heathen tribes and impenetrable jungles, so the western medieval and colonial heritage of hostility to Islam has underlain modern miseducation about Muslim society and history” (p. 53). However, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been increased public interest in the Arabic language and the religion of Islam. According to the Modern Language Association (MLA, 2017), from 2002–2006, the number of American students enrolled in Arabic language courses grew by 126.5 percent and again by 46.3 percent between 2006 and 2009. In the meantime, there was a surge in enrollment in Islamic studies and Middle Eastern studies courses. Although interest in these subjects increased, there was still a lack of accessible knowledge and instruction on Islam or Quranic Arabic. (MLA, 2017)

The bias toward presenting Islamic studies in academia has dominated ditto American higher learning institutions. Said (1979) argued that western scholarship historically portrayed Islam, Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies as barbaric, irrational, and underdeveloped. Said postulated that Western scholarship was understood to be developed, rational, and progressive, while traditional Eastern scholarship was depicted as underdeveloped, irrational, and backwards and, as a result, much of what is taught in American colleges and universities has been fraught with accusations of cultural bias and ethnocentrism. Moreover, those who taught Islamic or Middle Eastern studies at American colleges and universities often faced criticism that they were teaching from an Orientalist perspective or that they were not qualified scholars of the religion, since many have Western degrees from western colleges and

universities (Said, 1979). Faculty who are qualified and Objective are needed in all disciplines, including Islamic studies.

Islamic Higher Learning Institutions in the US

Islamic higher learning institutions have encountered different stages in the last forty years. Grewal and Coolidge (2013) noted that Islamic post-secondary education started to emerge in the 1980s. These institutions emerged to provide access to the academic study of Islam, Islamic culture, and science. Grewel and Coolidge (2013) explored the period of the emergence of the Islamic higher learning institutions and their outcomes. They stated: “the wide range of institutions of higher learning established by Muslim Americans has had diverse outcomes: some pedagogical experiments have failed and disappeared, others reinvented and resuscitated, and several are growing and successful” (Crewel and Coolidge, 2013, p.255).

Most of the Islamic higher learning institutions formed have suffered financial problems and have focused on linking their affiliations and accreditation with institutions in the Islamic world. According to Grewel and Coolidge, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) was established in Herndon, Virginia in 1981, and in the same year, the American Islamic College (AIC) was founded in Chicago, Illinois.

Unfortunately, AIC would fall into financial ruin in 1986, and it would close its doors until it was reopened in 2010 by Turkish educators linked to the Gülen Movement. While the Turkish educators were able to generate enthusiasm with the 2010 reopening, the institution does not have the same pedagogical and philosophical vision as its founders, Isma’il al-Faruqi and AbdulHammad AbuSulayman (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013).

Although the State of Illinois currently recognizes the AIC through the Illinois Board of

Higher Education, it does not have regional or national accreditation. IIIT is still operating but offers a graduate degree through a partnership with Beirut Islamic University. Its courses are taught in Arabic and are provided through distance learning and onsite course offerings. IIIT's master's degree in Contemporary Islamic Thought is unaccredited.

Three other institutions were later founded in the State of Virginia: The Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in 1988, the Muslim Teacher's College in 1991, and Cordoba University in 1996. Each would close its operation after a few years. The Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences was a satellite of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The school trained imams and chaplains for a brief period but was later investigated by the US government. According to a December 3, 2003, Wall Street Journal article, the school was used by the Defense Department to hire imams for the Pentagon. The Defense Department stopped using the institution after it underwent congressional investigations, and the satellite closed shortly after that.

Sister Clara Muhammad Schools founded the Muslim Teacher's College to train primary and secondary teachers for its schools. While the Muslim Teacher's College briefly trained primary and secondary school teachers, it also ceased operation after a few years. Cordoba University was part of a US Department of Defense program to train Muslim military chaplains. According to Internet webpage archives, the university's website stated it was made up of the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSSS) and Cordoba School of Professional Studies. Cordoba was also listed as an affiliate of the Washington Theological Consortium. These three institutions were unaccredited and closed after a few years of operation. According to Grewal and

Coolidge (2013), most of the first attempts at Islamic higher education failed due to a lack of resources.

Many Islamic higher learning institutions emerged after the year 2000. The most recognized of those institutions are: Islamic American University (IAC) in Southfield, Michigan (2002); Mishkah University, Texas (2004); Islamic University of Minnesota, Minnesota(2007); Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California (2009); Bayan Claremont in Claremont, California (2011); Respect Graduate School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (2015), Islamic University of Minnesota, Minnesota(2007); and Manara Institute, New Jersey (2015), All are in operation today, but only Zaytuna College has achieved regional accreditation through the WASC.

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs)

History of inequality in the land and a lack of access for the minority to the majority of higher learning institutions produced later what is known today as Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). According to Gasman (2008), MSI is a term that has only been used recently in the higher education field; He said:

The term Minority-serving institution (MSI) was developed only in the last decade to describe those institutions serving large numbers of minority students. These include those designated by the government as serving particular groups who have been historically discriminated against and who therefore are eligible for additional government funding. (p. 273-274).

Most definitions for MSIs are based on historical or enrollment criteria. The U.S. Department of Education defines MSIs based on legislations and the percentage of minority undergraduate enrolment (DOED, 2021). DOED, 2007 defined MSIs according

to student enrollment criteria as "institutions that enroll at least 25 percent of a specific minority group are designated as "minority-serving" for that group" (Doed, 2007, para, 1). According to the U.S. Department of Navy (2021), MSIs are eligible for special federal funding determined by the funding agency.

Some studies explored the cultures of early higher learning institutions and the emergence of MSIs. Thelin (2019) argued that during the time of colonies, higher education institutions served White Christian students, specifically Protestants, the predominant religion. Before the civil war, there were only three higher education institutions to serve Black students, including the Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the first Black higher education institution.

According to the U.S federal government, MSIs include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). The oldest MSIs are HBCUs that emerged after the civil war to educate Black students about religion and train them with various skills (John, 2014). Later, the number of HBCUs increased in the late 19th century due to the segregation policies that prevented Black students from attending higher education institutions that aimed to educate White students. According to the Department of Interior (2020), there are over 102 HBCUs, 274 HSIs, and 35 TCUs.

The culture of accrediting agencies is among the issues that play a vital role in granting accreditation. Cole (2006) explored one of the cultural aspects that dominate the US accrediting agencies toward MSIs. In his research, Cole compared curricula of tribal, Black, and mainstream colleges. Further, he analyzed several courses that focused on

African and Indian cultures. The study findings revealed that tribal colleges offer nearly ten times as many “ethnocentric” courses as mainstream colleges which raises the concern for accrediting authorities if these colleges have separate independent identities from their tribes and are considered legitimate knowledge institutions. Moreover, the study revealed that courses in Black colleges offered 15% more and 73% fewer afro-centric courses than mainstream colleges (Cole, 2006)

As for the experience of MSIs with Accreditation, Gasman et al (2008) discussed the regional accreditation issue of minority-serving institutions. The authors argued that Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) managed to get limited accreditations in their best cases. Moreover, they have faced fierce battles in obtaining accreditation, which pushed them to come together to form their organization in 1933, the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools for Negroes (ACSSN). Although ACSSN was not considered an independent accrediting body, it played a vital role in working with SACS to establish standards and procedures to grant equal membership to their institutions. However, SACS and other accrediting agencies fail to treat HBCUs and other Minority-Serving Institutions equally by punishing them more frequently than other member institutions (Gasman et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Many findings were revealed in exploring peer literature on American Islamic colleges and universities challenges in being accredited. Among the challenges found are the negative attitude of the regional accrediting agencies toward MSIs rooted in the belief that MSIs do not provide actual knowledge. Another challenge is the US Muslim communities' perception that Islamic schools are not as strong academically as other

institutions. Another finding revealed was the limited financial resources of the higher Islamic institutions which caused some of them to disappear.

In addition, the literature review findings also revealed the need for Accredited Islamic higher learning institutions for many reasons. Muslim students face marginalization and discrimination in higher learning institutions due to Islamophobia dominating Western societies and terrorist events like Sept 11, 2001. Moreover, Islamic studies offered currently in American higher learning institutions are biased since they adopt an orientalist perspective in their teaching, and Islamic studies need to be adequately served. Therefore, accreditation is necessary for Islamic higher learning institutions in America to ensure that these institutions are providing quality education and serve the purpose of Islamic studies to Muslims and non-Muslims. With only one accredited Islamic college in California, more accredited colleges and universities are essential to serving large Muslim communities to ensure they receive quality education like communities of other religious groups.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

My research focused on investigating the challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in obtaining accreditations. I used a case study as a methodological approach in qualitative research to better understand this area of investigation. I focused on two types of case study methods that may be applied to my dissertation to help understand the challenges of Islamic colleges and universities in being accredited. Methodology approaches help the researcher to study the researched topic to understand it, challenge it, and visualize a solution within the limits of critical bounding assumptions. Considering my intended investigation into the challenges facing Islamic colleges and universities in being accredited, a case study was needed in my research to develop a lens for exploring my research questions. My research question was: What are the unique challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in obtaining accreditation? In this chapter, I reviewed the case study and two of its methodological approaches, which I found to be appropriate as methods to employ for my doctoral research and dissertation. In addition, I provided below a brief description of the participants and data I collected that were relevant to the research study's research question.

Research Design

Case Study is an important research method of qualitative research which also includes other methods such as biography, a phenomenological study, a grounded theory study, and an ethnography. Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed informants' views, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

This definition is general and applies to all types of qualitative research methods. As for the case study definition, Creswell identified it as one of the primary research traditions used in qualitative research, especially in professional fields such as education, health, and business. Moreover, Merriam (1998) considered case study as a methodology that aims to explore a bounded system or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. From previous definitions we can say that A case study is a research method that involves an in-depth examination of a particular individual, group, organization, or event. It is commonly used in various fields, such as education, business, and medicine, to comprehensively understand complex phenomena.

Case study enjoys specific characteristics and advantages over other methodologies. Among those features: case study focuses on particular cases, and it is an in-depth investigation. Case studies comprise a deep and complete assessment of a specific subject, event, organization, or scenario. Researchers acquire a wealth of information on particular issues by investigating the case in real-life settings, such as a case study focusing on a specific company's marketing strategy and its impact on sales performance (Yin, 2003). Another characteristic is that case studies typically involve collecting qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, allowing researchers to gather rich, descriptive information about the case, such as conducting

interviews with employees and customers of a retail store to understand their experiences and perspectives on customer service (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, case studies use a holistic approach to capture a full view of the case, considering numerous elements and viewpoints. They frequently investigate several dimensions, such as social, psychological, cultural, economic, and organizational factors, such as exploring the factors contributing to the success of a startup company, including its leadership, market conditions, and strategic decisions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Applying Specific Case Study Methods to My Study

The types of case studies that best serve the purpose of my research and align with my research question are exploratory and explanatory case studies. I chose these two types of case studies since my research question focuses on the challenges Islamic colleges and universities face in obtaining accreditation. It requires me to explore the cases I chose as a sample to recognize and describe the obstacles to understand them better. However, I should be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the two types.

Exploratory case studies allow researchers to gather rich detailed data about a specific case or phenomenon. This in-depth information can provide valuable insights and a comprehensive understanding of the subject under investigation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Another advantage of the exploratory approach is its flexibility and adaptability to the research question, which enables the researchers to adjust their approach, methods, and data collection techniques based on emerging findings or new avenues of exploration (Yin, 2003).

However, Savin-Baden & Major (2013) cited the disadvantages of exploratory case studies by stating “ that mistakes made in earlier fieldwork may compromise later

data collection” (p. 155). Another disadvantage of this approach is its limited generalizability which means that the findings may have limited generalizability due to the limited number of cases on which the analysis is applied. The case's specific context and characteristics may differ from other cases or populations, making it challenging to draw broad conclusions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

As for the advantages and disadvantages of descriptive case study, Merriam (1998) argued that descriptive case studies do not employ theory to lead the research, but rather they stop at describing the case. However, Savin-Baden & Major (2013) found that researchers adopt descriptive case studies to rely upon a theoretical framework to lead their description. Additionally, Savin-Baden & Major (2013) argued that this type of case study is rich in detailed data and enables the researchers to understand the complexity of the problem because it is an actual life situation. Nevertheless, it may need more theoretical grounding.

Participants

Thirty participants were chosen for this study from three Islamic higher learning institutions that have been operating for eight to 17 years. All three institutions have sought accreditation since their establishment. However, only one of those three institutions obtained accreditation, and the other two still need to. The participants were one CEO, two accreditation liaison officers (ALO), seven board members, and twenty professional staff who oversaw pursuing the accreditation process. A selection criterion was established wherein only staff members who occupied advanced positions in their institutions and were involved in decision-making process. The survey was sent to all

administrators of the three institutions. In addition, follow-up interviews were conducted with three administrators after having taken the survey.

Data Collection Instruments

Interview

I held semi-structured interviews with three top administrators of the three institutions. The interviews lasted from 20 to 95 minutes. I conducted the three interviews with two accreditation liaison officers (ALO) and one CEO. I referred to the two interviewees from the unaccredited institutions as N1 and N2. As for the interviewee from the accredited institution, I referred to as A1. My research question for this research was: What are the unique challenges Islamic higher-learning institutions face in obtaining accreditation? The interview questions were designed to help find answers to my research question and help determine the challenges faced by the three institutions in obtaining accreditation. The interview consisted of five open-ended and one closed-ended question, allowing respondents to provide in-depth responses and speak freely about each question/topic (see Appendix B).

The interview questions' main themes focused on the institution's background, institution' challenges, self-evaluation, biases, and accreditation. For example, one of the questions was: I am curious to know about your experiences with accreditations. Can you describe the process you went through? My objective in asking this question was the following: to understand the challenges the respondent's institution went through in its effort to obtain accreditation, such as the accreditation requirements, the accreditation requirements met and those which were not, the institution's plan for the future to meet the requirements, and the importance of accreditation to the institution. I organized

follow-up questions to ensure that my questions were understood as in the previous one. The follow-up questions were: What are the accreditation requirements? What requirements were you able to meet? What are your plans for accreditation for the next round? How do you think it will go? How important do you think obtaining accreditation for your institution is? Another question was: What are other challenges you see, internally or externally, for your institution? My objective for the question was to determine the internal and external challenges the respondent's institution faces besides accreditations challenges.

The closed-ended question was: Did you experience any difficulties connected with the Islamic focus of your institution? I followed up this question with other questions including: How do you think the nature of your institution as an Islamic study university versus a non-Islamic one has to do with your accreditation? What other challenges have you faced with the Islamic focus of your institution? My goal for asking the question was to determine if there were any biases from the accrediting agency or others due to the nature of the institution being Islamic. The interview tool was used to acquire detailed insight into administrators' beliefs regarding issues related to their institutions and the accreditation challenges faced by their institutions.

Survey

Another tool I depended on for data collection was a Survey. A survey containing close-ended and open-ended questions created and sent out to all professional staff members who occupied advanced positions in the three institutions (see appendix C). The survey consisted of twenty-seven rating scale questions and three open-ended questions. The main themes of the questions focused on diversity, culture, evaluation of the

institution' resources, weakness and strength, and qualifications related to the institutions. The three open-ended questions allow respondents to provide in-depth responses for each question/topic. Two of the rating scale questions were about supporting diversified faculty and students to see if the institution encouraged the issue of diversity in their institution (see appendix B). The survey tool was developed and distributed using Qualtrics, an electronic advanced research survey tool. The purpose of the survey tool was to acquire detailed insight into professional staff's experiences regarding the evaluation of their institutions in many aspects. The Qualtrics Survey Tool allows study participants to remain anonymous by clicking directly on a survey link distributed through email accounts and social media.

Documents Collected from the Studied Institutions

Another data tool I depended on for my study was the Archival documents of the three institutions. The goal of collecting the archival documents was to better understand the three institutions' challenges and to help along with other data in the triangulation of data analysis and findings. I requested each institution provide me with documents related to its exchanged correspondence with the accrediting agencies, the number of full- and part-time faculty members and their academic qualifications, student body, faculty and students' diversity background, budget, and majors offered.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This research explored the challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in obtaining accreditation. As previously stated, I used three data sources, interviews, surveys, and documents, to better understand those challenges. I will present the results of the documents collected from the studied institutions first, then I will discuss the interview results, and finally I will discuss the survey results.

Data Collected from Documents Provided by the Studied Institution

The documents of the three institutions used for this research were collected from the top administrators of those institutions. Table 4.1 displays various institutional indicators identified in common across all three institutions (shown in each column).

The table revealed that A1 institution managed to obtain accreditation after six years of its establishment, whereas N1 was established in 2006 and has not managed to obtain accreditation yet. As for N2 institution, it has been operating for eight years without managing to obtain accreditation yet. This finding suggests the good preparation of A1 for accreditation. The number of students of the three institutions shown in Table 4.1 revealed several findings. The high number of students enrolled in the three institutions, compared to the number of students enrolled in the same discipline in non-Islamic institutions. This may suggest the preference of students to study this field in Islamic institutions. Another finding is that the number of students enrolled in A1's institution is lower than the number of N1 and N2 institutions. This observation raises the

question of why, if the students care about accreditation of the institution, they are enrolled at this level for non-accredited colleges.

Table 4.1

Summary of Information Gathered from Documents

Name of institution	N1 institution	N2 institution	A1 institution
Year of establishment	2006	2016	2009
Year of accreditation	Not yet	Not yet	2015
Number of active students	500	150	80
Number of faculty	32	20	26
Number of full-time faculty	0	0	14
Majors offered	Islamic Studies	Islamic Studies	Liberal art and Islamic Studies & Islamic Texts
Degree offered	AA, BA, MA, Ph.D	AA, BA, MA	BA, MA
Yearly budget	\$750,000	\$450,000	\$6,000000
Tuition	\$50 per credit hour for undergraduate \$75 per credit hour for graduate	\$130 per credit hour for undergraduate \$160 per credit for graduate	\$ 600 per credit hour for undergraduate \$ 1250 per credit hour for graduate (\$20000 annually for undergraduate, \$30000 annually for graduate)

The table shows that the N1 and N2 institutions' budgets are much smaller than the A1 despite having more students and degrees offered. This finding may indicate that the N1 and N2 institutions need more help generating funds as A1's institution does. Clearly, the financial resources of N1 and N2 are limited and fall short of supporting their institutions' needs, such as hiring full-time faculty.

The table also revealed that the N1 and N2 institutions had a lower number of full-time instructors, an obstacle to one of the core accreditation requirements of having at least two full-time faculty members available in the program. This issue was raised by N1 in his interview. In contrast, A1's institution has fourteen full-time faculty members, which is consistent with the accrediting agency requirements. It also may imply (by contrasting the yearly budgets) that A1's institution financial status enabled it to hire this number of full-time faculty. Another point about faculty worth noting is the number of the part time faculty of N1 and N2 is larger than the number of A1, which indicates the dependence of N1 and N2' institutions on part time faculty in their programs rather than full time which costs them less.

A final note is the high tuition of A1's institution compared to N1 and N2. Another great finding is how the accredited institution can raise its tuition multiple times than those of unaccredited ones. It suggests that A1 can receive much higher tuition because it is an accredited institution, unlike the other two, which could not because they were unaccredited. It also suggests that accredited Islamic institutions can generate more funds from the tuition of the students than unaccredited ones to help support colleges

financially. Finally, it may also imply that the low tuition of N1 and N2 institutions contributed to the limited financial resources available to pursue accreditation.

The document analysis revealed several findings. A1's institution spent less time obtaining accreditation than N1 and N2 institutions. Additionally, A1 has more full-time faculty than N1 and N2 institutions, while N1 and N2 institutions have more part-time faculty and students. The tuition for A1 institutions is higher. Finally, the budget of A1 institutions is much more than that of N1 and N2 institutions.

Interview Results

For the interview, I asked each participant six questions that contained themes I found helpful to depend on to help me understand the challenges of Islamic higher learning institutions. These abbreviated question themes are used as the sub-headings below. Examples of findings associated with each theme were taken directly from the participants' responses.

Accreditation Challenges and Qualifications

During the individual interviews, participants described the process of their institution's experience in seeking accreditation and where they stand. The interviews revealed that the accrediting agencies differed in their approaches but were similar in overall criteria. N1 explained, "*There are handouts or manuals where there are core requirements and standards that need to be fulfilled and satisfied within the organization to be granted this accreditation...it is like a checklist.*" In his response, N1 indicated a published manual by the accrediting agency in his territory that lists the standards and core requirements the institution seeking accreditation must fulfill. When A1 was asked the same question, she responded: "*There are thirty-nine criteria, and they are divided*

into four broad standards: Integrity, Transparency, Quality assurance, general operation... covers different areas not just educational, maybe similar to other accrediting bodies." Her response reflected that the criteria of the accrediting agency covers other aspects of the institution and is not limited to the quality of education only. Each accrediting agency in different parts of the country has its approach to the criteria that higher learning institutions seeking accreditation must fulfill; one has a checklist, and another has several requirements that the institution must satisfy to be granted accreditation, however, they all are similar in their criteria's substance. It was interesting to note that the response from the participant from an accredited institution described more specific elements of the criteria and standards.

Each interviewee also described where their institutions stood with the completion of the accreditation process. One institution managed to fulfill all the requirements and two were enroute. The institution that fulfilled the requirements of the accrediting agency for accreditation, was granted the accreditation unlike those that did not. N1 responded to the question of his institution's experiences with the process of accreditation and where their institution stood: *"You can say most of the requirements are ready. There are some of the items that are not ready yet to be honest and we are working on."* When the same question was addressed to N2, he responded: *"...there are five steps, we managed to achieve three of them"*. It seems from both responses of N1 and N2 that their institutions managed to fulfill parts of the requirements and were still working on the rest. However, from the school that had achieved accreditation, A1 explained how her institution was well prepared and fulfilled the accrediting agency requirements. She said:

When we had the accreditors come to visit us, I invited them to come to get to know us. We walked through all the thirty-nine criteria... We explained everything that we are doing... They paused and said: "You are ready, you should apply" ... We were the fastest school to get accredited by WASC.

This quote demonstrates a fundamental difference in timing when it comes to accreditation. The school that achieved accreditation started preparing well before their initial contact with the accreditors. A1 already knew the criteria and had a clear idea of how the school was positioned to respond.

The answers of the three interviewees revealed that the approach to preparation may be important to gaining accreditation. The institution that managed to fulfill the accrediting agency requirements credited the institution's good preparation in fulfilling the accreditation requirements and the technicality that changed the accreditation process, which both helped in receiving the accreditation quickly.

The main barrier to fulfilling the accreditation requirement that was discussed in the interviews concerned financial resources. N1 and N2 explained how the economic resources were the main obstacles they encountered in their efforts to fulfill the requirements of the accrediting agencies. N1 explained:

The main obstacle toward this achievement is the financial support. We don't have enough funding to achieve those parts of requirements. For example: one of the core requirements to have full time faculty. At least we need to have two full time faculty available. This is beyond the capacity of our institution to handle because of finance not because of anything else. So, this core requirement If we

apply for the accreditation and we don't have it available then the accreditation is going to be refused.

Respondent N1 cited in his answer how the lack of financial resources is delaying his institution's efforts to fulfill one of the central core requirements of the accreditation requirements, which is hiring at least two full-time faculty.

Respondent N2 also blamed the financial resources as the main constraint to fulfill the accrediting agency requirements. He said: "*We reached the third step, maybe ... is not working as fast as it is supposed to be, it is due to financial constraints.*" which means what was delaying completing the five steps required by the accrediting agency in his territory was the financial support. The financial resources were the main obstacle to completing the accreditation requirements for N1 and N2 institutions, a factor not mentioned as a barrier by A1 institutions.

As for the follow up question concerning the importance of accreditation to their institutions, the three respondents considered accreditation as a necessity. They felt it was an important factor to convince the Muslim community and the public that their institutions are offering quality education. A1 stated, "*Basically, the word accreditation is a way for us to give credibility to the community.*" In this way, having been accredited conveyed a status to the public. The N2 response for the same question was "*it is to be or not to be.*" which means that his institution without accreditation has no value. N2 added how accreditation would allow his institution to raise the low tuition which is getting now "

Another reason they described about the necessity of accreditation is to allow their students to be accepted in the workplace, and to be able to transfer to other colleges or pursue their education at other accredited colleges which in many times refuse to accept students or their credits from unaccredited institutions. N1 explained the specific impact of accreditation on students, *“There are institutions that our graduates want to continue their studies at, or they want to work at, and when our institution is not accredited then they refuse to hire our graduates or accept them in their programs.”* It was clear from their statements that they felt accreditation was a critical piece of the image the college presents to the community.

Another aspect of the importance of accreditation was its impact on other programs. N1 stated:

The second goal of obtaining accreditation is to open degrees in the secular sciences or granting degrees in the secular sciences. We are unable to do that apparently because we don't have accreditation. If we get it, we can open degrees in accounting, degrees in engineering, sciences, communication, whatever you name it. This is the only way to open such programs.

Therefore, he viewed accreditation as a gateway that would allow his institution to expand the programming. While only mentioned by one participant, this issue shows another way in which the importance of accreditation is experienced.

Gaining the community's trust, including the students, donors, and the public in general, was described as the primary goal of seeking accreditation. For example, A1

stated about the importance of accreditation to her institution: *"We just want credibility in the community."* According to the three interviewees, accreditation is essential for their institutions to gain credibility about the quality of education they provide, enjoy other benefits of accreditation, such as federal aid, their student's acceptance when transferring to different colleges, degree acceptance in the workplace, expanding the college programs to include secular ones, and gaining the trust of the public about the quality of education they provide.

Another finding that emerged from this set of questions was that of internal and external challenges. The interviewees from the three institutions discussed one challenge as the perception of Islamic institutions. A1 respondent pointed out how some people perceived her institution as being in its initial stages of development. She stated: *"Some say our institution is a startup, and some say no; it's been fourteen years."* This statement suggests that some think her institution is new, that it needs time to gain experience and build the reputation of other learning institutions to be trusted. A1 added to the topic of perception of her institution: *"Externally, as always, it is the public perception of different faculty views and whether we, as an institution, believe in those views"* This observation reveals another aspect of how the Islamic institution community's personal view reflects on the institution, especially if that institution does not adopt those views. It suggests that they all should be vigilant about their public statements.

The issue of credibility also came up with the institutions that were still in the process of gaining accreditation. In his answer, N1 discussed the perception of online Islamic higher learning institutions and how some people perceive them as neither credible nor trustworthy, he stated:

What we are facing is the reliability and the credibility of online education...we are not the only institution providing online Islamic education, there are a lot out there in North America, but unfortunately, many of them don't follow the standards so it reflects negatively on the concept and perspective of online Islamic education. For example: we received concerns from anonymous people that you guys are selling degrees for money, and your credibility is not trustworthy. Of course, that perception was not taken from our institution, and that reflects on us somehow Although we are very transparent in showing every standard we follow.

This statement implies that online Islamic institutions that follow good educational standards must still fight the bad image of being degree mills, which other poor Islamic institutions cause. Moreover, N1 complained about the absence of support of the Muslim community due to their perception of Islamic education as being not a necessity, he stated: *"The other external challenge is the support of the Muslim community who don't consider Islamic studies as a specialty they want to pursue or taking it seriously."* This statement suggests that the Muslim community may doubt the validity of Islamic studies as being a necessity or a real knowledge they consider it over other disciplines or similar.

As for the internal challenges, one issue that was raised was the problem of addressing change to the status quo for members. For example, N1 stated:

I can say the renovation or implementation of standardized procedures, I spent the past two years fixing them, that was a challenge because most of the people who work in our institutions have been there for at least ten years and accustomed to standards that are not up to the accrediting agency standards. It is difficult to change them.

N1 explained how challenging the status quo of the institution constituted an internal issue. The community members of the institutions are accustomed to certain standards that have been in place for years. One must apply efforts to implement new ones that are consistent with the accrediting agency.

Another factor that contributed to the internal challenges for both non-accredited institutions was their low tuition. The tuitions for the three institutions, as based on their documentation, can be seen in Table 4.1. N2 stated: “*Our biggest challenge is finances; tuition is very low. Until we receive accreditation, we will not be able to attract students who are willing to pay high tuition.*” N2 explained how the lack of financial support due in part to the low tuition impacts the salaries of the faculty and staff. Moreover, he explained that his institution is not able to attract more students who can pay higher tuition due to the lack of accreditation. However, he argued that those challenges will be solved when his institution obtains accreditation and has access to government financial funds. However, the issue of finance constraint was not a challenge for the accredited institution in this study. A1 stated: “*We have been financially ok in recent years and hope*

to stay like that.” This statement implies that her institution has overcome this obstacle, and it is financially stable.

Retaining faculty and staff was another internal challenge interestingly raised by all three institutions. A1 pointed out concerns about the turnover of some Faculty and staff; she stated, *“Some staff and faculty leave, but it has been better in the last couple of years than before COVID-19. However, it is still a challenge.”* This quote indicates the dissatisfaction of those personnel to stay and the inability of the institution to retain them. N2 blamed the financial resources for difficulties in hiring staff and faculty, and pointed out that even those employed are underpaid. He explained: *“The salaries of our instructors are underpaid because they believe in the mission rather than the financial part. We are also understaffed because of financial reasons.”* This quote reflects the challenge that the financial institution cannot afford to hire sufficient faculty and staff due to financial constraints. The same factor applies to N1, who said: *“At least we need to have two full-time faculty available. This is beyond the capacity of our institution to handle because of finance, not because of anything else.”* The discussion from the three respondents indicate that the three institutions shared the obstacles to retaining faculty and staff. However, A1 did not share the financial cause for it in the same manner as the others.

Biases

The interviewees from the three institutions were asked about the difficulties they had experienced with the accrediting agency and others due to the nature of their institution being Islamic. The question was addressed first in a close-ended format to determine if there were any biases from the accrediting agency or others due to the nature

of the institution. The question was: Did you experience any difficulties connected with the Islamic focus of your institution? The answers of the three interviewees revealed that biases, due to the Islamic nature of their institutions, were not experienced either with the accrediting agencies or with others. N1's answer to the above question was: "*The accreditation has nothing to do with the subject that you are teaching... it doesn't go into the details of what you are servicing...you can teach anything as long as you are matching the systematic requirements.*" This statement suggests that the accrediting agency cares only about meeting its standards and requirements when reviewing any institution for accreditation rather than the institution's focus, whether it is Islamic or other. It also implies that Islamic institutions focused on knowing and meeting the criteria of the accrediting agency and the Islamic focus of their institution was not a barrier for them.

A follow up question was needed to further explore N1 institution, being Islamic focused compared to other institutions in their experience and perception of the accrediting agency. My question was: How do you think the nature of your institution as an Islamic study university versus a non-Islamic one has to do with your accreditation? N1 answered:

I believe they are professional with all institutions regardless of their focus... All they cared about was whether we set up properly according to their requirements and standards. With that met then we are good to go... another thing to confirm is that they are professional and not biased at all. My kids are in a high school that is Islamic, and they got the accreditation without any issue from the same accrediting agency we are seeking accreditation from- schools branch They

got an accreditation because they met the standards. So, I don't expect any problems or challenges with them at all.

This statement implies that N1 reaffirmed the accrediting agency's professionalism and that its accreditation standards are applied to all institutions regardless of their focus. The agency applies the same criteria to all institutions, suggesting that it is professional, objective, and not biased in its performance. To prove his opinion, N1 cited the experience of an Islamic high school his children attend and how it received accreditation when it met the accrediting agency's standards without delay.

N2 answered the bias question: *"Not at all, neither at the state level nor with the accrediting agency."* Due to the nature of his institution, N2 denied any difficulties or biases in dealing with the accrediting agency or state agencies. Another aspect of this great finding suggests that accrediting agencies in different parts of the land is professional in its approach with Islamic institutions and not biased in dealing with them. N1's response matched N2's in denying the issue of bias.

A1 response to the bias question was:

This is the best example I can give you to say how important it is for Islamic organizations to embrace their own values and not to subject themselves to others... We thought this would be a problem. They have requirements that whatever degree you teach you should hold a higher degree than the class you are teaching, if it is a BA degree all the faculty should have Masters... We even have some faculty that did not have a BA because they just have Ijaza... So, we explained to them we think they are more than qualified actually. They responded back saying just educate us what the Ijaza system is? So, I took that lesson "Just

educate them”, that is going to be our uphill battle because most people are unfamiliar with Islam in general and Islamic studies so just have to keep educating them and not feel intimidated or frustrated that we don’t have something in place.

This quote contains excellent points. It indicates how the accrediting agency cooperated with A1’s institution to waive one of its core requirements for accreditation to accommodate A1 institution's professors who held *Ijaza* instead of an academic degree since this *Ijaza* could substitute for the required degree according to A1's institution. A1's institution overcame the obstacle of her institution's professors' qualifications needed by the accrediting agency by educating the accrediting agency about Islam and its culture in obtaining knowledge. *Ijaza* enables its holder to be qualified to teach Islamic studies. Moreover, *Ijazah* is a certificate by which the authorizing scholar acknowledges that the student has mastered a particular field of Islamic knowledge he studied under and is authorized to transmit it to others (Makdisi, 1989). This example showed the flexibility of the accrediting agency regarding their core requirements when those requirements are met by different methods by the institution and at the time negating any biases toward Islamic-focused institutions, which matched N1 and N2 answers. A1 argued that embracing the values of your religious institutions and educating others about them, including the accrediting agencies, is the best approach you can adopt with others. In addition, her quote implies the unfamiliarity or lack of knowledge held by the accrediting agency about Islamic studies and the need to educate them in this area.

As for the follow-up question about the challenges that A1’s institution faced being Islamic focus versus non-Islamic, A1 explained:

If we compare ourselves to other religious schools...all our students are Muslims. We don't say non-Muslims are not allowed to join... properly we are not able to attract non-Muslims students, maybe we will in the future ...another big topic is for example how willing are we to accept gender diversity so WASC is not saying you must accept all gender, transgender, mixed backroom and all of that. We can say no we don't want to do that. It is against our values... there might be more in the future of gender stuff, so we have to present our values and religious rules before it happens.

This quote identifies several challenges Islamic institutions face and the best way to approach them. One challenge is in attracting non-Muslim students, which Islamic institutions hope for in the future. This issue might suggest that students of other faiths are interested in something other than studying Islamic studies. It also could indicate that the central targeted students of Islamic institutions are Muslims. A second challenge highlighted in her response is the issue of gender and whether Islamic institutions would be forced to accept all genders, such as transgender. This challenge indicates a concern among Islamic institutions of addressing gender issues since it is against Islamic values, and concern of forcing addressing gender issues on Islamic institutions. However, A1 suggested approaching this issue by declaring that the gender issue is against Islam's values and presenting that clearly to others. She stated that WASC, the accrediting agency that grants accreditation in her institution region, does not force the issue of gender on institutions, according to her. However, A1 did not mention the issue of LGBTQ as a challenge to Islamic institutions, like the gender issue. Moreover, she did

not explain what the reaction of the Islamic institutions would be if the gender issue were to be forced on them.

Self-evaluation

The interviewees' responses revealed that all three institutions follow self-evaluation programs but differed in their approaches. The representatives from the three institutions each described conducting end-of-course evaluations, faculty and staff evaluations, and other traditional evaluations usually conducted by accredited institutions. However, A1's institution is adopting the Islamic evaluation system derived from Imam Ghazali's book on self-examination that advocates self-accountability. The self-evaluation question was asked to the interviewees: I would like to know about your self-evaluation process. What can you tell me about this area? N1 explained:

We are running a weekly meeting for the staff, so we present different aspects that they are facing week by week. We hear complaints from the students, issues from faculty members, issues related to the curriculum... Each course needs to achieve certain goals and those are set up into the syllabus of each course. The coordinator of the program is following up randomly during the semester... we are running surveys at the end of each semester with the students and with the faculty to see what their opinion is about the class, instructors' performance. Ethics, attitudes, was the time given to the course enough...such surveys help find what are the positives and the negatives, so we fix them.

This quote implies that Islamic institutions follow self-evaluation programs like others.

N1's institution conducts traditional self-evaluation programs such as the courses taught, the faculty evaluation, and other evaluation programs of the institution to enhance the

institution's performance. Moreover, N1's institution follows up with any obstacles that emerge from those evaluations.

N2's response to the self-evaluation was:

Each program and course have its own goals... For each course we have an assessment, we want students for example to learn 123...For a student to get an A, B or C is not a real measurement, what you need is to assess your goal achievement. We do have the head of the department to work with the faculty members to firm an assessment for each course... We evaluate the objective of the course and program. We also assess the objective of the college in general...In terms of faculty, there are three evaluations, we ask students at the end of the classes to fill out a survey- students rate the instruction. There is an observation that the instructors are supposed to have them once a year. The administration of the academic committee assigns someone for class observation and finally the instructor himself is asked to do an evaluation.

This quote suggests the intention of Islamic institutions to enhance their performance as other institutions do through following self-evaluation programs. N2's institution follows the self-evaluation process which covers students, faculty, staff and the performance of the college in general. The goal of all evaluation programs which are conducted in N2's institution is to achieve certain objectives set for those programs.

A1's response to the question of the self-evaluation program was:

We are doing Imam Alghazali's approach. We are doing the self-evaluation of our own deen (religion) "take yourself to account before taking to account" even when we do the HR evaluation process, we do the same... we made it mandatory.

Even in our course evaluation when the students filled up at the end of their experience with the course, the first section is self-assessment, how much did you study? What would you do differently? As much as we can make that part of our culture. The WASC evaluation process is aligned with that. They basically want to evaluate an institution after the institution finishes its evaluation and want the evaluation conclusion the same as their conclusion. If you have any issues, you should be not hiding them but showing them... what is the standard of excellence, your standards or their standards let's help them understand our standards...WASC wants these things done... I say understand the aims of their questions then not answer the question, answer the objective of the question then we end up showing more than what they are asking for.

This quote suggests that adopting Islamic values of self-program evaluation works. It supports the argument that the self-evaluation reflecting Islamic values aligns with the accrediting agency's criteria. A1 institution adopted the Imam Al Ghazali approach mentioned in his book "Self-examination," which says, "take yourself to account before taking to account," which means hold yourself accountable before you are held accountable (Sherif, 1975). This approach appeared to apply to all A1's institution's program evaluations. Moreover, any program evaluation was approached in her institution by understanding the program's objective rather than focusing on the method to achieve it. Then, a technique derived from Islamic values is applied to achieve the aspiring goal of the program. This finding also implies the accrediting agency's flexibility regarding its requirements of self-evaluation programs that should be conducted by institutions seeking accreditation.

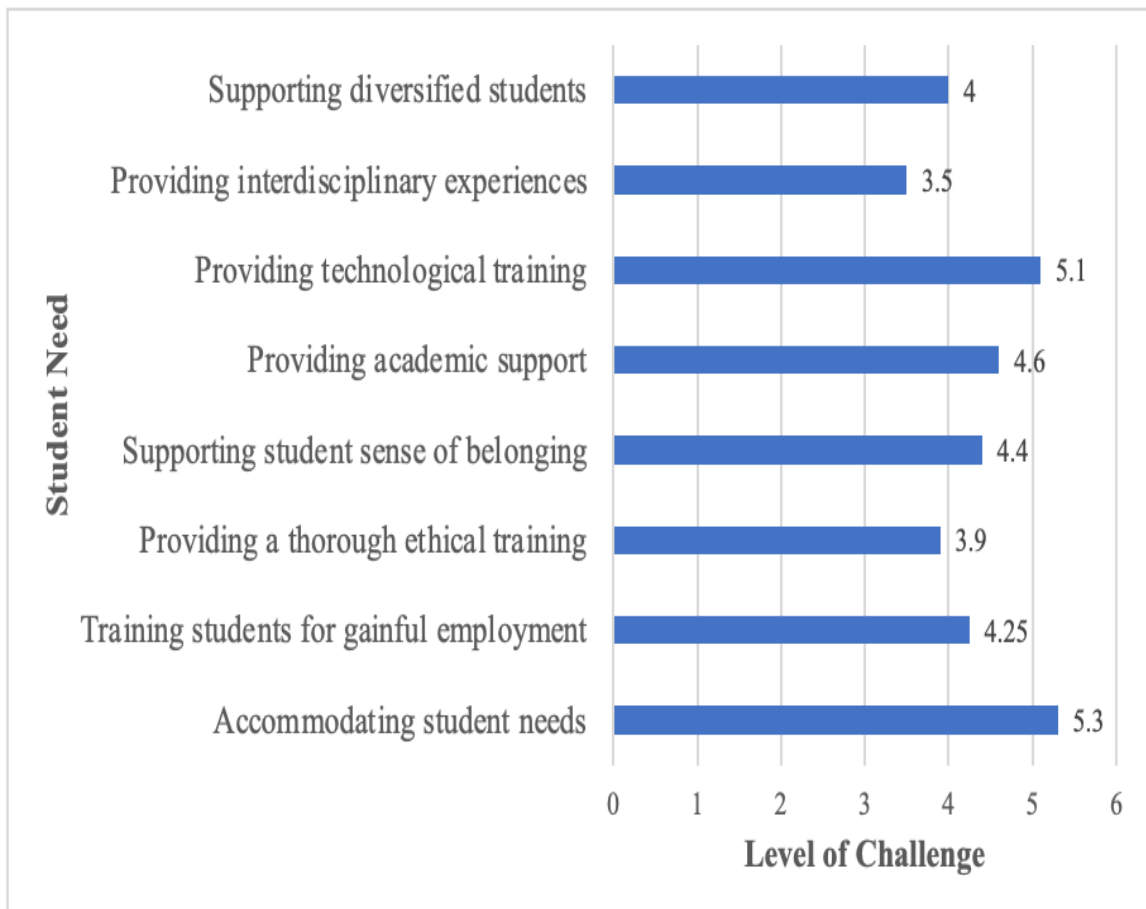
Survey Results

The survey asked respondents to respond to two sets of questions related to student support areas and institution's reputation. The responses were collected using a 10-point scale, with one indicating "totally disagree" and ten indicating "totally agree."

Figure 4.1 shows results from statements concerning the first set of questions concerning challenges in student support areas.

Figure 4.1

Level of Challenge Associated with Student Needs

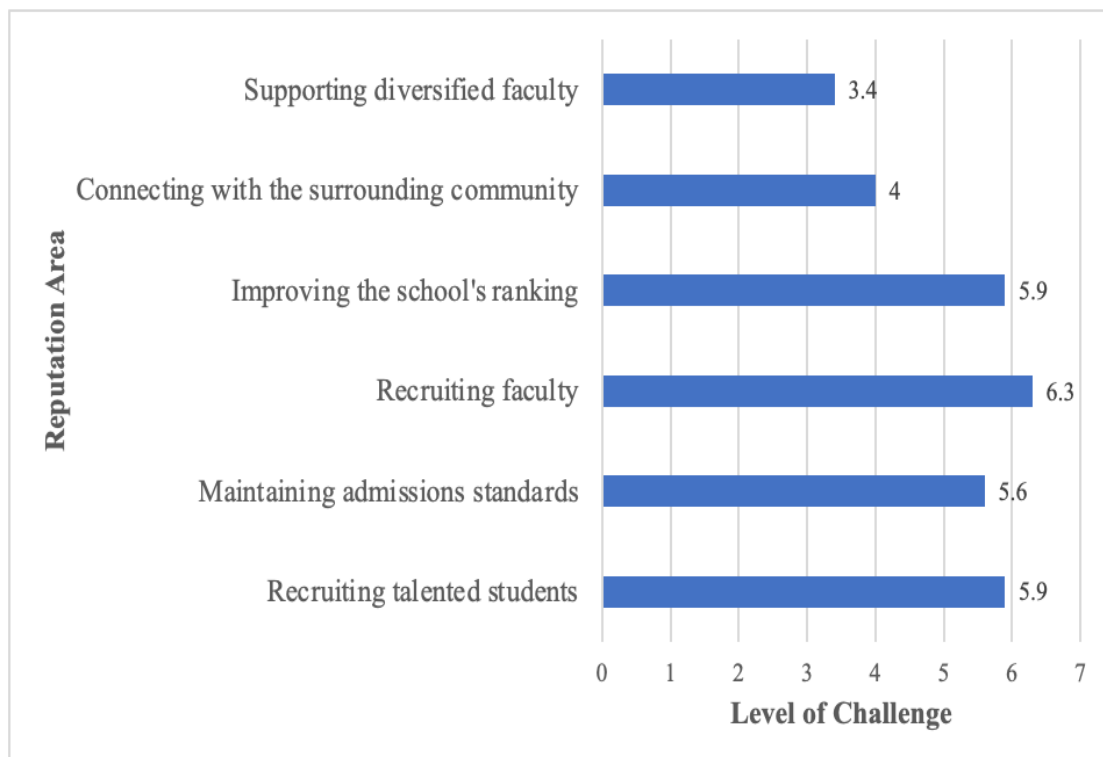


Overall, the institutions reported a moderate level of challenge in these areas, with most means falling between 4 and 5. The strongest agreement with challenge in this area seemed to be related to the accommodation of students' needs with a mean of 5.3 and providing technological training with a mean of 5.1.

The second set of questions concerned the challenges associated with the institutional reputation. The average response to these items is shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2

Level of Challenge Associated with Institutional Reputation



Overall, the institution participants from these institutions reported a moderate level of agreement with challenges in this area, with most means falling between 4 and 6. The strongest agreement about challenges associated with institutional reputation was with

maintaining admission standards (with a mean of 5.6), improving the school ranking (with a mean of 5.9), recruiting talented students (with a mean of 5.9), and recruiting faculty (with a mean of 6.3). It is notable how they affirmed that recruiting faculty constituted the biggest challenge of the institutions in this area.

The data analysis of the survey revealed the degree of consensus or divergence in perceptions. Higher means suggests a wider range of opinions, while lower means indicate more agreement among respondents. The Islamic higher learning institutions may want to pay closer attention to areas with higher variability to understand and address differing perspectives effectively. The analysis suggests a generally moderate level of perceived challenges across various aspects, with some areas requiring more attention and improvement such as accommodating students' needs, improving the school ranking, maintaining admission standards, and recruiting talented students and faculty.

In addition to the scale questionnaire, the survey contained three open-ended questions that covered the challenges of the respondent's institutions, their strengths, and their weaknesses. As for the challenges, respondents listed financial support as the most significant challenge. The inability to obtain accreditation, maintain education on campus, and work with staff overseas. As for the weaknesses of their institutions? The respondents listed finance, the institution not targeting native English speakers, and online teaching not a suitable environment for student-teacher relationships. As for the strengths of their institution, the respondents praised the authentic knowledge they receive, the digital library their institution provides, and the solid Arabic program.

Data collected for this research depended on three tools: interviews, surveys, and documents provided by the studied institutions. The interview data were collected from

three interviews with two ALOs and one CEO. The themes of the interview questions cover the challenges and qualifications of the interviewees' institutions in obtaining accreditation and their challenges in general, biases, and self-evaluation. The survey was distributed to the staff and faculty of the three institutions to be filled out. The survey contained two questions related to student support areas and the institution's reputation. The responses were collected using a 10-point scale, with one indicating "totally disagree" and ten indicating "totally agree." Nineteen participants from the three institutions answered the survey. Documents collected from the three studied institutions covered budget, number of full and part-time faculty, year of establishment and accreditation, majors and degrees offered, and number of students.

The documents collected from the three institutions revealed several findings. A1's institution spent less time obtaining accreditation than other two. Additionally, A1 has more full-time faculty than N1 and N2 institutions, while N1 and N2 institutions have more part-time faculty and students. The tuition for A1 institutions is higher. Finally, the budget of A1 institutions is much more than that of N1 and N2 institutions.

The data analysis of the interviews revealed that financial constraints were one of the main challenges for the two unaccredited institutions in obtaining accreditation. The lack of full-time faculty was also an essential challenge for the two unaccredited institutions. Retaining faculty constituted a challenge for the three institutions. The negative perception of Islamic institutions and Islamic studies constituted another challenge. Another challenge was the need for more support from the Muslim community. One of the institutions mentioned the gender issue as a challenge. And finally, the inability to attract non-Muslim students.

As for the biases, the three institutions believed in the professionalism and authenticity of the accrediting agencies. The data revealed no biases toward the three institutions from the accrediting agency or the others. In the case of the accredited institution, the data showed the accrediting agency's cooperation and flexibility.

As for the self-evaluation, the data revealed that the three institutions conducted end-of-course evaluations for the students and instructors, assessments for the performance of the institution in general, and evaluations of the courses taught. Moreover, data revealed that when course surveys and assessments of the faculty and institution are collected, administrations will act upon them. However, in the case of the accredited institution, an Islamic approach to self-evaluation was applied, and the accrediting agency accepted it since it serves the purpose of self-evaluation.

The survey data analysis revealed the need for improvement in accommodating students' needs and providing technological support. As for the institution's reputation, the data showed that improvement is needed in recruiting talented students and faculty, maintaining admission standards, and improving the school's ranking. The three open-ended questions in the Survey that covered the challenges faced by the institutions and their strengths and weaknesses revealed financial difficulties, the institutions' dependence on overseas staff, and the failure to attract native English speakers. However, one respondent praised the authenticity of the education provided.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview

In recent years, several Islamic higher learning institutions have been operating. However, only one of those Islamic institutions has thus far successfully achieved accreditation from authorized accrediting agencies in the U.S. This study aimed to examine the experiences Islamic higher learning institutions face in being accredited. The research question that guided this study focused on exploring the issues faced by Islamic higher learning institutions to obtain accreditation. To serve the purpose of this research, I explored three Islamic colleges, two of which were trying to obtain accreditation but had not received it yet, and one which had obtained accreditation. I utilized three data tools to approach this research: interview, survey, and documents collected from the observed colleges.

Discussion of Findings

Chapter Four provided and discussed results derived from analyzing interview, survey, and document evidence to help answer the research question of this study. The data analyses covered the following themes: challenges and qualifications, biases, and self-evaluations for the three studied institutions.

Challenges and Qualifications

Documents from the studied institutions revealed that the accredited institution succeeded in obtaining accreditation in a shorter period compared to other institutions still in process. It took the accredited institution six years since its establishment to obtain

accreditation. The other two institutions have been operating longer and are still trying to meet the accreditation requirements. This comparison may indicate the excellent preparation of the accredited institution for accreditation.

The findings about the time consumed for accreditation and how financial constraints are a barrier may relate to the literature's findings. The literature stated that most Islamic higher learning institutions formed in the last forty years have suffered financial problems and have focused on linking their affiliations and accreditation with institutions in the Islamic world (Grewal and Coolidge, 2013). However, the literature reviewed in Chapter Two did not mention good preparation as a favorable issue for accreditation by Islamic institutions.

The results revealed that preparation for accreditation was a critical factor in fulfilling the accreditation requirements. The accredited institution of A1 was well informed about the criteria and was positioned well to respond to it unlike the other two unaccredited institutions. This finding suggests that good preparation to meet the accreditation requirements prior to initial contact with the accrediting agency could help in obtaining accreditation.

These findings relate to the literature's findings regarding meeting the requirements of the accrediting agencies. The requirements set out by CHEA require any institution seeking accreditation to meet its requirements and align with its policies (CHEA, 2006). One of the three studied institutions met the requirements of the accrediting agency as a result of good preparation.

Financial constraints were one of the main challenges for the two unaccredited institutions in obtaining accreditation. The lack of more financial resources to support

their institutions' financial needs obstructed the two unaccredited institutions from fulfilling a primary core requirement of the accrediting agency. The accredited institution had much more financial resources which enabled it to support the financial needs of its institution to meet the accreditation requirements. This result suggests that the economic well-being of the institution helps in the fulfillment of the accreditation' requirement. The lack of support of the Muslim communities and the low tuition contributed to the financial constraints of the two institutions. In contrast, in the case of an accredited college, we notice how accreditation helps receive much higher tuition, which contributes to its economic well-being and increases its annual budget multiple times higher than unaccredited institutions.

The findings about Islamic institutions' financial constraints match the literature's findings. The literature indicates that most of the Islamic higher learning institutions formed in recent years have suffered financial problems (Grewal and Coolidge, 2013). Such economic constraints lead many of these institutions to link their affiliations and accreditation with Islamic institutions overseas because it costs them less.

Retaining the faculty was another challenge faced by the three institutions. Due to financial constraints, the two unaccredited institutions lacked enough full-time faculty to help them meet major core accreditation requirements. This finding indicates the dependence of the unaccredited institutions on part-time faculty due to their lower cost. Retaining faculty for the accredited institution was also a challenge, which resulted in faculty losing their enthusiasm after joining in facing the rapidly changing rules in the institution. The accelerated changing of regulations in Islamic institutions causes some

faculty to leave. Losing the enthusiasm of the faculty after joining the Islamic institution raised the question of why this enthusiasm is lost.

The findings about hiring and retaining faculty and staff and their attraction to Islamic institutions through enthusiasm relate to the literature's findings. The literature revealed that some Islamic institutions established in recent years managed to attract faculty through their enthusiasm due to the nature of their institutions (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). However, extant research did not include an examination of the issues concerning retaining those hires.

The negative perception of Islamic institutions and Islamic studies, in general, constituted another challenge for the three institutions. The perception of the Muslim communities about Islamic studies were described by the participating institutions as being not necessary knowledge to be acquired as compared to other sciences. They also described the perception of the communities that Islamic institutions are degree mills. These views play a vital role in obstructing their support of Islamic higher institutions. Moreover, the negative perception of the public communities about Islam itself constitutes another challenge to Islamic institutions. There continues to be public views framing Islam as terrorist or oppressive. These negative opinions become linked to Islamic institutions. Even if that opinion does not reflect them, it hurts them.

The negative perception of Islam, Muslims, Islamic studies, and Islamic institutions that emerged as a finding from the data is congruent with the finding that emerged from the literature about perceiving Islam, Muslims, and Islamic schools negatively (Douglas and Dunn, 2013). Further, Douglas and Dunn (2013) argued that misperception of Islam has been ingrained in American culture. Most Americans'

information on Islam comes from television, films, advertising, and print journalism. This misperception has resulted in stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam. In addition, the negative perception of the Muslim community of Islamic institutions and Islamic studies as being not a necessity and the institutions are degree mills is compatible with the findings from the literature, which revealed that Islamic schools do not offer quality education and the subjects of Islamic studies do not constitute an attraction for them (Grewal and Coolidge, 2013). This perception may explain the tiny percentage attracted to Islamic institutions.

Accreditation emerged as necessary for Islamic higher learning institutions for all three of these Islamic institutions for several reasons. These reasons included gaining the community's trust in those institutions, helping their students pursue their education or transfer to another accredited institution, gaining acceptance for their graduates in the workplace, raising tuition, finding a way to establish other programs in their institutions, enjoying federal aid, and teaching Islamic studies from an Islamic perspective. The findings from the documents review also revealed that more students are enrolled in the three institutions than are enrolled in the Islamic studies departments in non-Islamic ones. These findings suggest that students interested in this discipline are more inclined to study it at Islamic institutions. This finding implies that obtaining accreditation would overcome many Islamic institutions' barriers.

The findings of this study support the findings revealed from the literature. The findings from the literature argued that Islamic studies offered currently in American higher learning institutions are biased since they adopt an orientalist perspective in their teaching. Islamic studies need to be adequately represented (Said, 1979). Therefore,

accreditation is necessary for Islamic higher learning institutions in America to ensure that these institutions are providing quality education and serve the purpose of Islamic studies to both Muslims and non-Muslims. With only one accredited Islamic college in California, more accredited colleges and universities are essential to serving large Muslim communities to ensure they receive quality education like communities of other religious groups.

The large number of students enrolled in the three institutions shows the students' interest in learning Islamic studies. However, the number of students in the accredited institutions still needs to grow. The accredited institution attracts only fewer students than the other unaccredited institutions in my case study. That observation may suggest that the students do not care about accreditation. However, it may also reflect the difference in tuition costs for students, as the accredited institution charged more than four times more than the next highest unaccredited institution for undergraduate students, and almost eight times more than the next highest unaccredited institution for graduate students.

The literature's findings do not match the findings from this study in this area. The necessity of accreditation for Islamic institutions to attract more students, Muslims, and non-Muslims, to study Islamic studies at accredited institutions was not reflected in the findings of the data on the number of students at an accredited institution versus a non-accredited one. This finding may raise the question again for the viability of accreditation for Islamic institutions.

The survey results revealed that all three institutions felt the need for improvement in accommodating students' needs and providing technological support. As for the institution's reputation, the results showed that improvement is needed in

recruiting talented students and faculty, maintaining admission standards, and improving the school's ranking. Responses to open-ended questions revealed the financial difficulties, the institutions' dependence on staff from overseas, and not targeting native English speakers. However, one respondent praised the authenticity of the education provided which may indicate the satisfaction of some students about some of the provided programs.

The need for improvement in accommodating students' needs and providing technological support and other needs of the institution may relate to the literature finding about Islamic schools that complain of similar problems (Grewal and Coolidge, 2013). The dissatisfaction of the Muslim community with accommodating students' needs in Islamic schools, such as vital academic programs and sports, turns families away from them to public schools where their satisfaction is more met. This shows a necessity for Islamic institutions to work on those issues. As for the dependence on staff and faculty from overseas, the literature indicates that many Islamic institutions link their affiliation to Islamic institutions overseas. However, the literature did not address whether those institutions depend on the staff and faculty from overseas.

Biases Held by Accrediting Bodies

A possible issue considered in this study was whether the accreditation organization may hold biases that prevent Islamic institutions from being accredited. The three institutions believed in the professionalism of the accrediting agencies' performance and denied any biases they had experienced with them. The findings revealed the accrediting agency's unawareness of Islamic approaches in education. However, when the accrediting agencies were educated about these approaches, they showed cooperation and

compromise toward the Islamic institutions regarding some of the accreditation requirements. This finding may indicate the absence of biases from the accrediting agencies toward Islamic higher learning institutions.

The findings concerning the accrediting agency's lack of biases toward Islamic institutions contradicted the literature's findings, which considered the knowledge provided by MSI institutions not fundamental and needed to be more authentic (Cole, 2006). For example, Cole (2006) compared curricula of tribal, Black, and mainstream colleges. He analyzed several courses that focused on African and Indian cultures. That study's findings revealed that tribal colleges offered nearly ten times as many "ethnocentric" courses as mainstream colleges, which raised the concern of accrediting authorities if these colleges have separate independent identities from their tribes and are considered legitimate knowledge institutions. In contrast, the findings from the current study revealed that embracing Islamic values by Islamic institutions and educating the accrediting agencies about them would greatly benefit the two parties in all aspects. The accrediting agency's cooperation with Islamic institutions regarding some of its requirements showed understanding and willingness to help those types of institutions. Moreover, the finding concerning the absence of biases from others toward the institution's focus contradicts the literature's findings as mentioned earlier.

Self-evaluation

As for the self-evaluation, all three institutions conducted several consistent self-evaluations. They conducted end-of-course evaluations for the students and instructors, assessments for the performance of the institution in general, and evaluations of the courses taught. Moreover, the data showed that the participants felt when course surveys

and assessments of the faculty and institution were collected, administrations acted upon them. In the case of the accredited institution, an Islamic approach to self-evaluation was applied, and the accrediting agency accepted to meet its criteria since it serves the purpose of self-evaluation. Accepting one of the accrediting agencies of the Islamic version of self-evaluation indicates that both versions serve the purpose of self-evaluation. Educating the accrediting agencies about Islamic approaches in the field of education may increase the chance of approving those approaches by the accrediting agencies.

The findings of the three institutions' self-evaluation contradicted the literature's conclusions concerning the quality of education provided by MSI institutions. The literature revealed that accrediting agencies' dominant perception is that MSI institutions do not offer quality education (Cole, 2006). However, as explained earlier, the self-evaluation process in the two unaccredited institutions matches the process followed by other traditional institutions.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was the limited number of participants. I invited larger numbers of top administrative staff and faculty of the three Islamic institutions to participate in this research, However, only 22 participants including the three interviewees were willing to be involved. This confinement reduced the number of participants, allowing for limited focus group discussions. I would prefer a larger pool of participants, such as engaging students for better and more fruitful discussion.

A second limitation of my study was the low return rate of the participant population. Specifically, the survey garnered a low percent response rate. Higher

response rates assure more accurate survey results and adequate data analysis. Therefore, it is difficult to state that the results represent the entire population.

This study focused on three Islamic institutions, an accredited one, and two unaccredited in the US. While the findings may need to be more generalizable, the study will add to the existing literature on Islamic postsecondary institutions, Islamic studies, religiously affiliated colleges and universities, and MSIs.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should focus more on the viability of accreditation to Islamic institutions. Although there are large numbers of Islamic institutions that have been operating for many years, only one institution achieved accreditation. More research on this field will determine whether accreditation would be a great addition.

Additionally, more research is needed to investigate the reasons behind the limited number of Islamic-accredited institutions. Despite being one of the largest religious groups in the US and expected to be the second largest in a few years, this number does not represent the Muslim portion of the population. In contrast, there are more accredited institutions for smaller religious groups.

While this research is one of its kind in the US, more research is needed in this area. Further research on this topic would better help determine Islamic institutions' challenges in obtaining accreditation. This type of research also contributes to the literature on Islamic colleges, MSIs, and higher institutions.

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand the challenges Islamic higher learning institutions face in being accredited. The data tools I depended on to help serve the

objective of this research, along with related literature, revealed several challenges. Financial constraints, retaining faculty, and lack of support by the Muslim community were among those challenges. Contrary to the findings of the literature review, the revealed data did not determine biases to be a challenge.

Good preparation by the institution for the accreditation before its initial contact with the accrediting agency may highly increase its chance of being accredited. Moreover, embracing the Islamic values by the Islamic institutions help them meet the requirements of the accrediting agency while serving at the same time the values of their institutions. Additionally, educating others, specifically the accrediting agencies, helps in bridging the gap and adjusting the misperception about it and may speed up the process of accreditation.

This research is unprecedented in higher education and the first of its kind in the United States. It adds to the literature on religious-affiliated colleges, Islamic Studies, Muslims in higher education, Muslim colleges and universities, and MSIs. It also contributes to and benefits higher education in general.

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



Institutional Review Board

Date: October 11, 2023

Study #: IRB-FY2024-40

Study Title: Exploring the challenges that face Islamic higher learning institutions in obtaining accreditation

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

Abdul Hammami

Julia Smith

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the three IRB approved (date-stamped) consent documents can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent forms in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Sites:

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Founders/presidents/ administrators' interview Script

1) I am interested in knowing more about your own background in higher education. Can you tell me a bit about it?

- > What is your professional background?
- > What is your academic background?

2) I would like to know about the background of your institution. Can you tell me about the process or experiences you had when you were developing it?

- > When was the Idea of Establishing your institution?
- > When did you actually start?

3) I am curious about your experiences with accreditation. Can you describe the process you went through?

- > What are the accreditation requirements?
- > What requirements were you able to meet?
- > What are your plans for accreditation for the next round? How do you think it will go?
- > How important do you think obtaining accreditation for your institution is?

4) Did you experience any kind of difficulties connected with the Islamic focus of your institution?

- > How do you think the nature of your institution as an Islamic study university versus a non-Islamic one has to do with your accreditation?
- > What other challenges have you faced with the Islamic focus of your institution?

5) I would like to know about your process of self-evaluation. What can you tell me about this area?

- > How do you evaluate your students' learning and satisfaction?
- > How do you evaluate your staff performance?
- > What do you do after you have obtained the result of the evaluations?

6) What are other challenges you see, internally or externally, for your institution?

APPENDIX C
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study that is being done by Abdul Hammami, a graduate student working under the direction and supervision of Dr. Julia Smith, Coordinator of Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University. Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can choose to stop your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are not comfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, or the Department of Organizational Leadership.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to explore challenges faced by Islamic higher learning institutions in obtaining accreditation.

Who can participate in this study?

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are a staff at an Islamic higher learning institution.

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to complete a survey about your view of the Islamic colleges and universities, your satisfaction of them, and the quality of education provided. The survey will be done online and will take 10 minutes to be completed. For this study, the potential risks are minimal. The survey is anonymous. No identifiable data that can directly be linked to you will be collected.

Are there any benefits to me?

There may be no direct benefits to you, however, the results of this study may benefit others in the future. Will I receive anything for participating? You will not receive anything for participating in this study.

What if I want to stop participating in this study?

If you want to stop participating, close your browser before completing and submitting the survey. If the survey is submitted, it will not be possible to withdraw your data from the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

Abdul Hammami, ahammami@oakland.edu, tel: 810-333-0944. You contact also my advisor Dr. Julia Smith, j15smith@oakland.edu. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board, 248-370-4898.

Do you want to participate?

Yes

No

For each of the areas listed below, please identify how much of the challenge you feel it is for your institution, from None at all (0) to A great deal (10).

None at all A great deal
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Recruiting talented students ☐ Not Applicable



Maintaining admissions standards ☐ Not Applicable



Recruiting faculty ☐ Not Applicable



Improving the school's ranking ☐ Not Applicable



Accommodating student needs ☐ Not Applicable



Connecting with the surrounding community ☐ Not Applicable



Training students for gainful employment ☐ Not Applicable



Providing a thorough ethical training ☐ Not Applicable



Supporting student sense of belonging ☐ Not Applicable



Providing academic support ☐ Not Applicable



Providing technological training ☐ Not Applicable



Providing interdisciplinary experiences ☐ Not Applicable



Supporting diversified faculty ☐ Not Applicable



Supporting diversified students ☐ Not Applicable



What, if any, other challenges do you feel your institution faces?

For each of the areas listed below, please where your institution is on a continuum from Great Weakness (0) to Great Strength (10).

Great Weakness	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Great Strength
Faculty scholarship											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Student scholarship											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Community projects/outreach											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
High quality instruction											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Current technology											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Supporting student needs											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Positive campus climate											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Student engagement with the institution											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Student involvement in campus activities											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Faculty involvement in campus activities											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Library resources											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Laboratory/scientific research facilities											☐ Not Applicable	
●												
Diverse course offerings											☐ Not Applicable	
●												

What, if any, other weaknesses do you feel your institution experiences?

What, if any, other strengths do you feel your institution provides?

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

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