

# Proposal to Expand Opportunities for Middle Eastern and Northern African Students

An initiative to officially recognize a large group of minority students as a diverse group on campus deserving of said recognition.

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## **I. Introduction**

Within Fordham's Diversity Action Plan for Addressing Racism and Educating for Justice, the University pledges a commitment to "develop robust strategies for effective recruitment and retention of diverse students to Fordham." Yet, the University has yet to make efforts toward effective change to recognize the diverse perspective MENA individuals bring to the Fordham community.

In an effort to capture the direct concern of Fordham students, included here is a letter from Karam Youssef GSB '26, who wrote about his personal experience with his identity and his attitude towards Fordham's unwillingness to recognize him as a student eligible for programs and scholarships which he should rightly qualify for. The letter is as follows:

"As an Arab-American, I have never really understood where I fit into the grand scheme of diversity within the United States. And as it turns out, no one else really knows or very much cares where I fit in either.

According to the United States Census, I am a white American. However, throughout my life, I have never been treated like I was "white." In fact, according to the majority of white Americans that I have encountered, there has always been a problem with who I am. Sometimes, the language I speak is scary, the food I eat is weird, the headscarf my aunt wears makes them uncomfortable, and the holidays I celebrate are "silly" and to not be taken seriously. I get interrogated constantly about my culture and religion, forced to take responsibility for random acts of violence displayed on the news, and answer questions revolving around why "my people" are always killing others. According to the former president of the United States, I come from a culture and religion that is bred in violence and discrimination, and according

to most of the U.S population post 9/11, my people are "enemies of freedom." I have faced an immense amount of slurs, insults, and bullying, to the point where today I still sometimes get uncomfortable telling people my name, for fear that I will scare them off. I also have to live in fear that my mother, a Syrian immigrant, will be harassed based on her Arab origins and her thick accent she carries with pride. To white people, I am anything but white. But according to the U.S, I am. So what am I?

I hoped to find an answer to this question in the next chapter of my life: College.

Coming into university here at Fordham, I was excited and hopeful for a new landscape. A place where I could finally own my culture and who I was, and a place where my diversity and heritage could be celebrated and finally respected after the years of persecution, judgment, and violence I have faced from the predominantly white population I grew up with. As a Freshman I had plans to join Fordham's Diversity Scholars program, which grants me the opportunity to connect with Major companies who are providing younger "diverse" students with exclusive opportunities. Excited to apply and connect with a student body I could feel comfortable with, I was stopped right in my tracks. Yes, the program was exclusive to "diverse" students, but a category that contained my ethnicity as an Egyptian-Syrian wasn't listed. There was no section for North African or Middle Eastern. I decided to look for other opportunities or programs where I could connect with people like myself and work on my professional career, but I was met again with the same problem in nearly all of them. My ethnicity did not make the cut. In an effort to understand why I was being left out, despite my diverse background, I decided to email Gabelli's Personal Professional Development who ran most of these programs. This is where I would be told that these opportunities were "aimed at helping

underrepresented US populations, Black, Latino and other Native or Indigenous populations that have been deprived of opportunities in the past." This I completely understood, and supported, however, was I as a Middle Eastern student not underrepresented in the United States? After reflection and research, I have come to the conclusion that in the United States, not only are us Middle Eastern men and women underrepresented, we are ***invisible***. **We are an invisible minority.**

To the United States Census, we don't exist. Because of this, we are stripped of opportunities to improve our communities. We are stripped of opportunities to fight against civil rights abuses. We are stripped of opportunities to properly organize. Statistically, as a Middle Eastern with an Arab name, you are two times less likely to get a response to your resume in comparison to a white-sounding name. As a Middle Eastern Woman, you are significantly less likely to hear back from landlords when applying to housing for the same reason. Now, I could continue listing different ways we as Middle Easterns are underrepresented and discriminated against in the United States, but I shouldn't have to. Bottom line is, we aren't even acknowledged. We have been stripped of our culture, our heritage, and overall, stripped of who we are: A beautiful and diverse group of people with a beautiful history.

I demand to be seen, and I demand representation. I believe that taking the first step starts here, at Fordham University, and soon all across the country. I am a Middle Eastern/North African teenager in the United States, **and I exist.**"

- Karam Youssef GSB '26

## II. Notes

**Representation:** Including [MENA](#) (referring to the region that comprises the Middle East and North Africa—Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) individuals in diversity programs and scholarships promotes representation and visibility for a historically underrepresented group. According to [ArabAmerica.com](#), "Arab-Americans are not officially recognized as a federal minority group and because of this, reporting numbers are almost never exact. Reports of the population of Arab Americans are estimated from 160,000 in New York City alone to 405,000 in the state with adjustment for underreporting. Arab-American immigration to the New York area can be traced back to two distinct waves of immigration from the Arab world. In New York, Lebanese and Syrian Americans comprise 40% of the Arab-American community."

**Cultural Diversity:** MENA individuals bring unique perspectives, experiences, and cultural backgrounds to the table, enriching the diversity of the scholarship recipients, as well as the overall Fordham community.

**Addressing Inequalities:** Arab-Americans specifically face a higher poverty rate than the average American. 13.7% of Arab-Americans live below the poverty line, though the figure increases to over 28% for single mothers. In addition, many have faced bigotry and race-based hatred that white Americans do not face.

**Encouraging Education:** Scholarships play a critical role in making education accessible and affordable for individuals from all backgrounds. By including MENA individuals in diversity scholarships, we are encouraging education and supporting their personal and professional growth.

**Breaking Stereotypes:** Including MENA individuals in diversity scholarships helps to break stereotypes and challenge negative perceptions. It promotes a more inclusive and diverse environment where individuals are valued for their unique qualities and contributions.

These are just some of the reasons why MENA individuals should be included in Fordham diversity scholarships and programs. It is important to recognize and celebrate the diversity of all individuals and provide opportunities for success and personal growth.

### **III. Request**

#### **A. Areas for improvement**

##### **1. Fordham First-Year Diversity Scholars Program**

a) "Introduce high-performing undergraduate students who identify as **Black, Hispanic, or Native American** to career opportunities."

(1) Notably does not include any representation for MENA-identifying students, despite those students hailing from a myriad of international backgrounds and cultures that should be recognized by Fordham University.

##### **2. Scholarships like UPS Foundation Scholarship:**

- a) "These scholarships are awarded to high-performing students from **underrepresented** groups based on both need and merit."

- (1) Under the federal definition of race, any MENA student would not be eligible for this scholarship. Fordham University must strive to provide special scholarships that include ALL of its diverse students, not ignoring those hailing from the Middle East or Northern Africa.

### 3. Diversity Action Plan Implementation

- a) In 2020, Fordham University authored a Diversity Action Plan

- (1) Since the publishing of that plan, there has been a semesterly release.

- (a) Another update of the plan has not been published for over a year.

- (b) **Core Tenet:** "Developing robust admissions strategies for the effective recruitment of students of color"

- (i) "Create an overnight Multicultural Admitted Students' Yield Program designed specifically for historically underrepresented students and their families."

- (a) This program has not been initiated just yet, but there is concern surrounding what groups will be

invited to participate in this  
program, including MENA students.

- (ii) "Review each admission application holistically, in light of Fordham's recent adoption of a test-optional admissions policy, as we look for students who will be academically successful and bring personal qualities of integrity, perseverance, and leadership to our campus communities."

- (a) In our conversation with admissions, there is a piloted portion of the Fordham portion of the Common Application, which asks students to identify their ethnic identity. Admissions does strive to be holistic, but the upcoming Supreme Court decisions surrounding Affirmative Action and undergraduate and graduate program admissions may limit the ability to collect such data in the future.

- (2) Inclusion of MENA representation should be included in the plan because administrators within Admissions and



Gabelli PPD have stated that we are not the first student group to bring this issue to their attention. While there are some diversity programs that Fordham does not decide the filters for, they have the ability to sway these employers to consider the inclusion of MENA as its own ethnic category as opposed to being categorized under White.

**4. Gabelli DEI Cultural and Flagship Events:**

a) Includes Black History Month, Women's History Month, AAPI History Month, Hispanic/LatinX Heritage Month, but lacks Arab American Heritage Month events.

(1) National Arab American Heritage Month was recognized in April 2021 by U.S. President Joe Biden.

(a) Has yet to be included in the set of Gabelli DEI initiatives.

**5. Gabelli DEI Plan:** Not explicitly provided on the website. Only core objectives are discussed.

**6. Gabelli Website DEI Student Affinity Groups/Clubs:** Notably does not include MESA (Middle Eastern Students Association), one of the largest and most diverse student affinity groups on campus.

**7. Explore Nomura Freshman & Sophomore Diversity Program (PPD):**

"Who should apply: We encourage talented and intellectually curious students who identify as Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, LGBTQ+, Women, Veterans, and Students with Disabilities to apply for the program."

- 8. J.P. Morgan Freshman/Sophomore S&T Teach-In Diversity (PPD):** "JP Morgan Sales and Trading will be hosting a teach-in for African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American and Native Pacific Islanders."

#### **IV. What's Next?**

- A. Inclusion of MENA students in current scholarships and programs
  - 1. Both through GSB and FCRH, as well as school-wide scholarships
    - a) Applies to PPD programs, diversity-based programs on campus, as well as scholarships/scholarship programs for students.
- B. Proposing more scholarships for students from diverse backgrounds
  - 1. Specific inclusion of MENA students in existing diversity-based scholarships, as well as including them in any new scholarships that are based on race/ethnicity.
  - 2. Creation of new scholarships opportunities for MENA students specifically, reaching out to MENA alumni to support the initiative.
- C. Updating student body and faculty on administration's work to combat inequity.
  - 1. Update Diversity Action Plan Implementation on Fordham Website
  - 2. Begin including MENA students, programs, and initiatives in the Diversity Action Plan Implementation
    - a) Allows student body and others to keep track of the Fordham administration's progress on the impacts of this proposal and other initiatives related to MENA-identifying students.

#### **V. P&A Examples:**

**A. Boston University:**

1. Boston University Hariri Foundation Scholarship Program
  - a) Nominates students from Lebanon for a limited number of scholarships.

**B. Georgetown University:**

1. The Sultan Qaboos bin-Said Arabic Language and Culture Scholarship
  - a) This scholarship fund was created to provide scholarships to selected Arabic majors. Further information about the program is available from the Office of the Dean of the Georgetown University Faculty of Languages and Linguistics or the GU Arabic Department.
2. The President Anwar El Sadat Memorial Scholarship
  - a) The Anwar El Sadat Scholarship was established to bring needy Egyptian students to Georgetown University to earn an undergraduate degree (in the school of their choosing) provided they return to Egypt upon completion of their degree.

**C. University of Connecticut**

1. Middle Eastern Cultural Programs
  - a) Recognize the contribution of MENA students on campus by hosting Middle Eastern Cultural Programs
  - b) Programs include:
    - (1) Yaldā Night
      - (a) Yaldā Night is an ancient festival in Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey celebrated on the winter solstice. UCONN

students and faculty of all backgrounds come together to eat traditional cuisine and take part in culturally-relevant activities.

(b) Beauty in the Middle East

- (i) BME is a fashion show hosted by UCONN's administration to pay homage to culturally significant garb

**D. University of Michigan:**

1. McLennan Family Foundation Scholarship

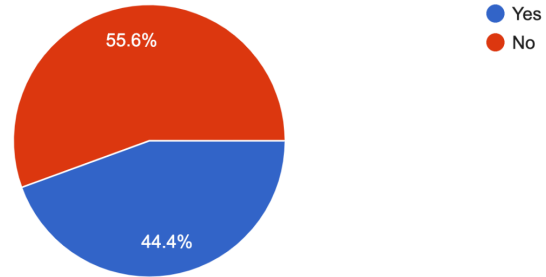
- a) Open to students who are Arab American/MENA, Black/African American, or Latinx.

## VI. Inclusion Questionnaire Results (as of December 10, 2023)

### A. 27 responses

#### 1. Do you identify as MENA (Middle Eastern and North African)?

Do you identify as MENA (Middle Eastern and North African)?  
18 responses



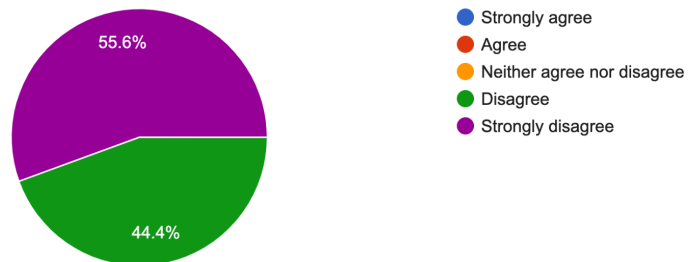
a)

(1) 44.4% (8 respondents) identify as MENA

(2) 55.6% (10 respondents) do not identify as MENA

#### 2. Do you believe Fordham promotes the inclusion of MENA students in programming?

Do you believe Fordham promotes the inclusion of MENA students in programming?  
18 responses



a)

(1) 55.6% (10 respondents) strongly disagree

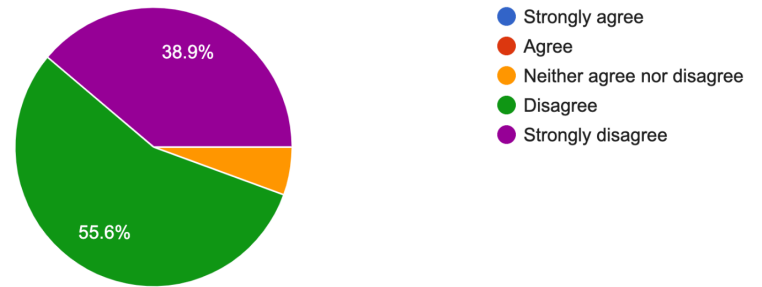
(2) 44.4% (8 respondents) disagree

**3. If you answered strongly disagree or disagree to the above question, please feel free to expand here.**

- a) "Fordham doesn't consider us a minority and use minimal effort to highlight our community, especially during ramadan."
- b) "Fordham lacks tact when promoting other events which promote discrimination."
- c) "There is rarely a programming scenario where MENA students are mentioned or incorporated in to. Many minorities are often mentioned or spoken about but there is Rarely a situation in which a campus poster, diversity event, scholarship, etc where MENA backgrounds are recognized. Students are forced to put themselves into groups they don't necessarily fall into in order to be incorporated or to be involved. There is also minimal support given to MENA related clubs or events in emails where they should be mentioned (not sure if this is a student issue or administration) like MESA events, PSN events, and many more. Many MENA on campus also identify as Muslim and there is also minimal support for Muslim students on campus. A religious based school should be more accommodating to to Muslims as they are with Jewish and Christian based programs on campus. Especially during the month of Ramadan, only a brief e-mail was sent out from the President and a very short message in a campus ministry email. It is often tough for Muslim or MENA students to find out about events on campus or ways they could be included."

4. Do you believe Fordham has taken steps to make MENA students feel included?

Do you believe Fordham has taken steps to make MENA students feel included?  
18 responses

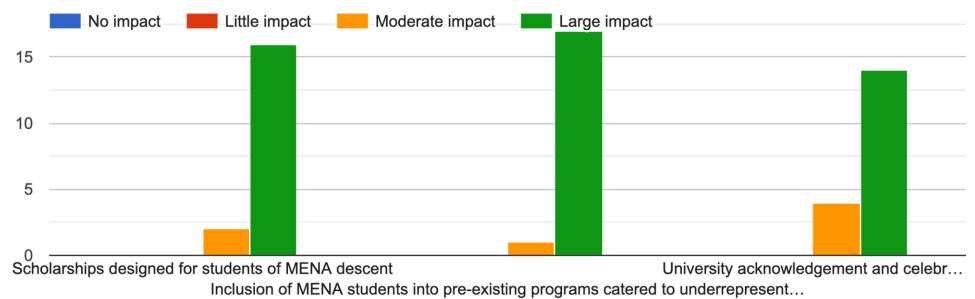


a)

- (1) 38.9% (7 respondents) strongly disagree
- (2) 55.6% (10 respondents) disagree
- (3) 5.6% (1 respondent) neither agrees nor disagrees

5. How impactful would each of the following be in improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging at Fordham?

How impactful would each of the following be in improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging at Fordham?



a)

- (1) Scholarships designed for students of MENA descent
  - (a) 16 students said this would have a large impact
  - (b) 2 students said this would have a moderate impact

- (2) Inclusion of MENA students into pre-existing programs catered to underrepresented communities (e.g. First Year Diversity Scholars Program in Gabelli)

**(a) 17 students said this would have a large impact**

**(b) 1 student said this would have a moderate impact**

- (3) University acknowledgment and celebration of National Arab-American Heritage Month

**(a) 14 students said this would have a large impact**

**(b) 4 students said this would have a moderate impact**

**6. Please feel free to leave any other comments here.**

- a) "The University should do more for Muslim holidays. For example, they should provide meals during Ramadan or be more accommodating with dining hall hours."
- b) "Fordham needs to promote awareness of Palestine on campus"
- c) "There is a lot to be done and stuff that needs to be done in order to improve the experience for MENA identifying students."