



OUR VOICES

University Needs To Do Better When Identifying Race



by The Chicago Reporter

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After decades of institutionalized racism against people perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim in the U.S., it is a great disappointment that the University of Illinois continues to categorize Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students as racially white in data, surveys, and university records. These populations face significant levels of racism across the U.S., in the state of Illinois, and on college campuses. To fight racism and discrimination and quantify it, this group must have its own designation separate from white.

Currently, these students are classified as white, even as they are targeted as distinctly different from and inferior to whites, portrayed and treated as potential terrorists, enemies of the U.S. nation, and too frequently attacked for belonging to what bigots crudely deem a misogynist and backwards culture and religion (Islam). This institutionalizes their invisibility — meaning although they face racial adversity, they are denied recognition as a racial/ethnic group that has the legitimacy to advocate for racial justice, resources, and rights or simply be recognized, known about, and understood as having a distinct experience of race/ethnicity in the U.S. Perhaps institutionalizing their invisibility is intentional. Indeed, pro-war/anti-Arab and anti-Muslim policy makers benefit when the communities they are targeting lack avenues to advocate for their rights and their freedom.

Whether it is racial profiling at airports, government surveillance, or discriminatory immigration policy, racism against people from the MENA region has been growing since the 1970s and was consolidated after 9/11. Across Illinois, we have witnessed Islamophobic elected officials like [Sharon Brannigan](#) spreading hate about local schools filling up with “Muslims” (referring to the large Arab immigrant population in her district).

In 2017, a Department Of Justice report revealed that social media posts by police officers are heavily anti-Muslim. [One Chicago Police Department officer posted a photo of a dead Muslim soldier in a pool of his own blood with the caption: “The only good Muslim is a \(expletive\) dead one.”](#) Writing on Muslims, Chicago police union chief’s Facebook posts [assert](#), “Savages, they all deserve a bullet.”

Surveillance against Chicagoland's Arab Americans is a serious form of racial profiling. When officials reinforce racism against people from the MENA region, they enable racist behaviors in everyday life, in local communities, on public transportation, at work, in the streets, and at school.

As a professor at the University of Illinois, my Arab American students tell me about their encounters with racism on campus. A freshman described how she was harassed by a man who screamed, "Do you have a bomb in your bag" when she was traversing a walkway alone. A chemistry student mentioned how his instructor blamed him for cheating based on his perception that all Muslims are liars.

It's infuriating behavior they've been subjected to and yet at the moment we can't adequately classify it as racism.

Racism devastates local communities. It creates fear of the broader society and has grave material implications — from employment to housing to medical care. For people from the MENA region, discrimination cannot be adequately documented because we lack data due to being unable to distinguish the MENA community from white people.

This is why I agree with the Arab American Cultural Center's student-led campaign, **#CountMENAI**n at the University of Illinois advocating for a MENA category. In a **study** conducted by UIC's Arab American Cultural Center with students primarily from Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Iran, and Egypt, the majority did not agree with being classified as white or Caucasian.

Despite the bankrupt nature of the U.S.' racial classification system whereby people of color need to rely on the very system of racial designation to fight against racism, we cannot advocate for rights, racial justice, or resources without it. In the U.S., since the civil rights movement challenged the census to stop counting people in order to exclude them (Chinese Exclusion Act, Jim Crow segregation), the census has been an essential tool for **measuring** who is excluded and what resources can be mobilized to better include them. For example, **in 1977**, a directive outlined the federal government's definitions of race to determine whether and to what extent Latino students faced discrimination in education.

The impact of not having a category is profound. It not only erases a community's experiences with racism, creating a lack of understanding that hatred against Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims exists in the first place, but it also denies their advocates the data needed for effective advocacy for the resources they need to survive and thrive. These resources are essential to promote student learning and success — from culturally and racially specific mental health services to ensuring that faculty are knowledgeable about MENA students' backgrounds and needs. Academic advisors should be better equipped to address challenges these students face such as in housing, scholarships, and tutoring — all areas where they are currently either invisible or not

included. Recognition also contributes to a sense of belonging and inclusion — challenging isolation — which is essential to student success.

To be sure, some MENA students might pass or identify as white. Yet every community faces this and this reality should not obstruct efforts to right historical wrongs. One might also wonder whether a MENA category could be used to further surveillance or racial profiling of these communities. MENA advocates across the U.S. have determined that the benefits of a racial category outweigh the risks, especially since many agree that even while designated as white, racist policies are still going to place them under surveillance.

UIC has specifically responded to students' needs previously. When students organized in 2015-16 for an Arab American Cultural Center, Chancellor Michael Amiridis agreed and it is now one of the first such centers serving specifically Arab American students on a college campus. But the center cannot do its job of serving students without data about the student community.

It's important to recognize that the new category would also benefit the larger University of Illinois community and the state of Illinois at large. Non-MENA students would get to learn about people from the region, their experiences, and their history, while reflecting on commonalities, solidarity, and shared social justice struggles. We live and work together, so where better than a campus to learn from one another? If diversity is truly a cornerstone of the University of Illinois system, it is time to take a step that accurately reflects this group's racial positioning in U.S. society and solidifies the inclusion of MENA students.

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