ABSTRACT

CONFRONTING ISLAMOPHOBIA: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL EFFECT OF
DIFFICULT DIALOGUE ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT BIASES CONCERNING
ISLAM

by

Jason O. Davis

Adviser: Julia Smith, Ed.D.

College campuses in America have become increasingly diverse in recent years. The
increase in diversity has not resulted in an increase in intergroup dialogue and/or interactions.
Many college campuses have employed a variety of diversity and inclusion programs to foster
intergroup relations and improve campus climate. One type of program that has been utilized is
difficult dialogues, conversations centered on topics often deemed too taboo to discuss (race,
religion, LGBTQ, etc.).

This research study explored the impact of difficult dialogue programs on implicit
attitudes towards Islam. Using a quasi-experimental design, I investigated whether participation
in a difficult dialogue program led to a change in results on an implicit attitude test (IAT) of
college students. In addition to examining the impact of this program, I also explored the views
of participants in the program about their views of Islam.

The study focused on undergraduate students of a single university. I compared the
treatment group of 18 students who participated in a difficult dialogue session to the control
group of 15 students who did not participate. Participants from both groups were recruited from
courses housed in the same department at the university in an attempt to minimize t differences
between the two groups.

Findings revealed that participants in the treatment group had increased their affinity towards Islam to a higher degree than those in the control group. Findings also revealed that participants in the treatment group were less likely to have negative associations of Muslims following the difficult dialogue session and were more likely to recognize discrimination towards Muslims. Finally, the research revealed that participants of difficult dialogue sessions reported an increase in desire for further interactions with Muslims and learning about Islam. The implication of the findings for college campuses is that difficult dialogues on religion can be an effective tool to minimize biases towards religions and interfaith tensions and promote future interactions between faith communities.