

**Is the Muslim community accommodated to their needs by city college?**

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## **Is the Muslim community accommodated to their needs by city college?**

The first thing I do after a class as a Muslim college student at the City College of New York is see if I missed a prayer. Thankfully, City College offers a prayer room for all students. When I went to the prayer room for the first time on campus, it was a medium-sized room, just enough to meet the needs of the Muslim students on campus.

What really caught my attention was the only thing I heard after praying was the complaints from the Muslim community. The Muslim students at City College were being kicked out of their medium-sized rooms in the North Academic Center building to move to a much smaller room in the Wingate building.

They were furious about this because their new prayer room in the Wingate building was so small that during the time for prayer, Muslim students would literally overflow the room and pray in the hallway. The room would be a place where you would just quickly pray and get out because the room was so cramped that you couldn't even talk to your friends without being in the way of someone else praying.

You wouldn't even be able to greet your friends and socialize with them inside the room, and a prayer room is not only a place to meet to pray to God but to socialize with other students. I kept on hearing, "Why is this room so small?" "Do they really think they can keep on relocating us like sheep?" "Everyone, please sign this Google form so we can show the student council how many people use this room and how small the room is."

However, in the NAC building (North Academic Center), people would sit down with other students, discussing life and college. Some would do their work quietly, while others would pray. It seemed like a peaceful environment.

When I was asking the Muslim community some questions, they told me that they have been struggling to keep their prayer room for quite some time now. They have had

four different rooms in the past four years. They have had prayer rooms in the Baskerville, Shepherd, NAC, and Wingate buildings. Every year they were kicked out and relocated.

### **What do other Muslim students have to say?**

Was this opinion only shared with a few or shared with most of the Muslim community? What I did to test this hypothesis was to make a few inquiries of the friends and acquaintances that I have within the Muslim community.

I interviewed two other Muslim students at CCNY. I asked them both four questions that were identical. Which were: "How do you feel about practicing your religion at CCNY?" "What are your thoughts on the prayer room being relocated? Do you think it would be harder for Muslim students to practice their religion without a prayer room? If CCNY did not have a prayer room, would you feel comfortable or fine with always trying to find a private space to pray?"

The first person I interviewed was Moheeb. He is a sophomore at CCNY. I meet Moheeb at the smaller prayer room at the Wingate building. When I finished praying, I noticed he was right behind me. He was furious because he just received the news that this room will be the new permanent prayer room.

For the first question, he said, "I feel confident practicing my religion at CCNY." For the second question, he said, "It was definitely a struggle for people who wanted to practice their religion due to the issues regarding prayer space changes." "It was a struggle praying in a smaller space."

For the third question, he said, "It would definitely be way harder for Muslims to practice without a prayer space, as Muslims have to complete five obligatory prayers a

day." For the fourth question, he said, "I would rather have a space where congregational prayers can be prayed than pray by myself."

The second person I interviewed was Youseef. I met him when we finished praying in the more spacious prayer room in the NAC building. After we finished praying together, I asked him the same four questions that I asked Moheeb. I was curious to see if there would be a completely different opposing response.

His answer to the first question was, "I am very grateful that I'm able to practice my religion at City College because when I was in high school, I didn't have that same freedom." It almost felt like I had to hide who I really was because most of the students around me were not Muslims. So, if I tried to practice my religion, they would criticize and judge me.

For the second question, he said, "I don't even know why they relocated the prayer room. Out of nowhere, we were notified that we were getting a room change. I feel like they just wanted to make our lives harder. But it could have been much worse, at least we still have a room. Some other people don't have that."

For the third question, he said, "If we didn't have a prayer room, it would be very difficult to practice Islam because one of the pillars of Islam is to pray. We wouldn't have a singular location where we can pray, and we would be so disorganized."

For the fourth question, he said, "If you asked me this question when I was younger, I would definitely say that of course I would be worried about what other people would think of me. But lately, I stopped caring about what other people think, and I am proud to be a Muslim. As long as I can find a spot where it is clean and not too loud, I don't really mind. However, I would still prefer to have a designated private location where I can pray."

## **Is this only happening at CCNY**

It's not only CCNY Muslim students who are having this issue of practicing their religion. This is happening to a lot of universities all over America.

At Wichita State University, Marim Salim and other students in the Muslim community would have to pray in the library. And when the library was packed during finals week, they would have to pray in between the aisles of the bookshelves.

A lot of students complained about the lack of a prayer room. Most would have to pray in the back of an empty classroom or office. There was a masjid to pray at that was a 10-minute walk from campus, but not a lot of students could use this building because of tight schedules.

“She has seen students praying in offices, or in the back of empty classrooms. Sometimes, she says, other students think something is wrong. They approach the Muslim students and ask, “Are you OK over there?””

The Muslim community wanted change for their community. They wanted their own space to be able to pray comfortably without other students thinking there was something wrong.

Matthew Conklin, student-government president at the time, convinced the university's president, John W. Bardo, to remove the pews at the unused chapel and replace them with carpets and foldable chairs. This was very important for many students since the chapel was centered right in the middle of the campus.

He convinced the president by attaching the will of Mrs. Harvey D. Grace, who was the person who donated all the money to build the chapel in the first place. Matthew

attached the will because in the will it said that the chapel was to be "open to all creeds and all races of people."

### **Creating Safe Spaces for Muslim Students**

This same problem of Muslim college students not feeling comfortable and safe when practicing their faith is also occurring at another college. In North Carolina, the Muslim college students at their university always feel like they have "a heavy weight on their hearts, minds, and spirits" when they practice their religion on campus.

This community wrote a piece about many different ethnic Muslims because they wanted to express their experience of being Muslims in academic spaces. In this piece, they talked about the importance of college administrators and college communities understanding the experiences that students who are religious experience at their campuses.

They should also understand that many students who practice their religion don't feel safe in public because a lot of Muslim college students "always feel at risk of being judged or misunderstood."

Many Muslim students don't feel safe practicing their religion because of many problems in the academic space. For example, Rashid dealt with horrible professors treating him differently than everyone else—worsely because of the religion he was practicing.

### **What additional problems are there that prevent Muslim students from practicing their faith?**

In a short film called Forbidden Love, the protagonist of the film is a punk college student in Southern California. She has a lot of piercings and other "punk paraphernalia." However, she is a Muslim who loves to pray and enjoys it so much.

On the campus quad, one of her Muslim friends invites her to pray alongside other Muslims in the middle of the campus in front of everyone. The thug Muslim desires to. She is unable to pray because she sees some of her non-Muslim friends off in the distance.

She doesn't want to feel uncomfortable or be judged based on the religion she practices by other people who don't understand how much religion plays a role in her daily life.

She tries to find a safe and private place to perform her prayer. She tries to pray in a stairwell, but people just look at her suspiciously. So, then she tries to pray in a classroom and even in the bathroom ("which is considered unsuitable for prayer because of its state of uncleanness"), but she was disrupted both times.

"Finally, she boldly walks to the same spot on the lawn where her Muslim friends just prayed. Still nervous, she cautiously pulls her headscarf out of her backpack. She looks around apprehensively. Having overcome her timidity, she dons her headscarf and begins her prayers."

Right after she started praying, a tall blonde woman who was watching her pray walks over, puts on a headscarf, and joins her in prayer. Then, an African American woman, also walking towards the pair of ladies with a head wrap on, also joined them in prayer.

Based on this short film, we understand that many Muslim college students don't feel safe praying and practicing their religion in public and want a private space to connect with God. When the punk Muslim student started to pray, two other students who didn't really feel comfortable praying on the lawn like the punk Muslim student before joined

her because they felt like the coast was clear and it was okay to express your religion in front of people.

She was forced out of her comfort zone because the university didn't offer a safe private spot for Muslims to pray, as did many other students on this campus. However, this happens to many other students at all different types of universities around the country.

Universities should protect their students' privacy because how can you expect students to be productive when they're worried about being judged? How would you feel if you always had to hide who you really were while you were in college? It would be too tiring and stressful.



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