

## **An open letter to President Mike Fitts and the Tulane University Community**

Dear President Fitts:

As I complete my studies here at Tulane University- School of Public and Tropical Medicine, I wish to share with you the experience I have had as a Pakistani Muslim at Tulane.

My journey started when I got the happy news that I had earned a prestigious Fulbright scholarship for pursuing a PhD degree in Global Health Policy and Management. My choice was between Tulane and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

I must admit that a few friends raised concern about going to a university in the Southern U.S. They feared, based on some of their own experiences, that I might be discriminated against and, at worst, might have to drop out before completing my program.

With these concerns in mind, I communicated with Dr. David Hotchkiss, the professor who would become my supervisor. Having had Skype calls with him, it was obvious that he could see that I was a Pakistani Muslim, but rather than express concern, he was very supportive and showed that he wanted to mentor me. Ultimately, I chose Tulane.

Once here, it was important to me to observe my regular daily prayers, in the early morning and late evening in the Deming Pavilion residence and three times a day while I was in the office. Although my three office mates, all international students, were very supportive, the office was not the ideal location for my prayers. One encouraged me to reach out to Student Affairs about a facility better suited to my needs, and the needs of other students. There was no harm in trying, she advised.

So I wrote to Dr. T.J. Stranova, associate dean for student affairs and admissions. Within 48 hours, Dean Stranova had arranged for use of the student lounge for prayers three times per day and advised the SPHTM community.

Feeling encouraged by this response, I looked to my early morning and late evening prayers, which I offered in my room. Along with Dean Stranova, I approached facility manager Katina Walker who was equally positive and welcoming to the idea. Within one day, she put things in place, advising students and security when prayers would be offered in the Deming student lounge.

My own stereotypes were dispelling.

Soon after I received a note from Dean Stranova. Use of the Tidewater student lounge for the prayers was increasing. Student Affairs recognized how important this issue was to the SPHTM community and soon we were celebrating the opening

of a dedicated interfaith prayer room to be open to students of all faiths. I could see that the school took pride in this effort, which was taking care of students needs and promoted harmony, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among groups of differing beliefs.

Still the effort grew. Next, we approached Kristy Magner with the Office of International Students and Scholars to talk about starting an interfaith community across the university. This group now consists of students at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels and faculty from multiple departments with plans in place for several initiatives, including an engagement with the Interfaith Clergy Association in East Jefferson Parish about dispelling stereotypes among different faiths. It's a testament to Tulane about the university's desire to encourage a tolerant community within and beyond campus.

That has all been external, but what has been my personal experience here at Tulane? A few friends of mine at other American universities warned that faculty would discriminate against students with my background. Well, I can say that after two years of coursework, I've been able to get straight A's in all of my classes, proof to me that at Tulane hard work is what matters regardless of your religion or background.

What about my fellow students? With help from Dr. Hotchkiss, I started a small club focusing on global health policy and research in low and middle income countries, initially with just a few faculty and students. Soon however, we were hosting live talks with leaders of global health policy and research, who shared their experiences with graduate students working in more than 30 developing countries. It was not ethnicity, color, or outlook that mattered. It was the work that mattered.

All of my experiences here at Tulane have come down to this: if you have an idea, there are people here to help you out, to nurture it so that the idea blossoms. The atmosphere here is very supportive for new ideas.

Even amidst the political situation in the U.S. leading up to and following the election, the community here has responded in such a positive way, openly sharing support for international students, migrants, Muslims, all groups; the role of Office of International Students and Scholars has been instrumental in garnering the needed support for the international community. During the December holidays, many faculty and local students invited us to meals in their homes, even arranging for Halal meat and foods. Every experience has shown such open heartedness, open mindedness, and inclusiveness.

The purpose of the Fulbright program centers around public diplomacy, how to bridge gaps and dispel stereotypes from both sides. My experience at Tulane has fully lived up to this Fulbright ideal that people can learn about and come to understand one another. I've had thoughtful, open discussions about Islam, Pakistan, and our current global situations. At one end my own stereotypes about

American society were shattered, and on the other end, I've frequently heard from my colleagues "Interactions with you have strengthened our viewpoint that hasty generalizations about any religion, ethnicity, and nationality should be avoided and personal experiences should be trusted more than the rhetoric around".

My experience at Tulane has been overwhelmingly positive, both personally and professionally enriching. I completed all my course work and defended my PhD dissertation in less than 2.5 years. I was selected as one of the "Emerging Voices for Global Health in 2016". With a very customized guidance from career services at SPHTM, I have received three job offers from renowned public health agencies in Asia. I'm excited to be returning to my country with excellent professional and technical skills. All my success has been because of the environment here and the support from the faculty and students around me.

I'm happy to say that I made the right choice.