There is no doubt that after September 11, 2001, the image of Muslims in America evolved dramatically. A growing interest in Islam led some to learn more about the religion, evidenced by the Qur’an and other Islamic books selling out at many bookstores. Some, on the other hand, fell into ideas about Islam being a religion of hatred for all things “American.” It was the goal of this group project, and this class, to explore these misconceptions, how they formed, and what role Muslims now play in America and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While my peers delved into how non-Muslim students on campus perceive Muslims and what initiatives the University is taking to further educate the student population about Islam, my main objective was to see how Muslim students on campus see the United States government and the University’s administration. I also inquired about their views on the non-Muslim student population here.

Before diving into the findings of my research, let me explain how interviews were conducted and the research process as a whole. Interviewees included friends and friends of friends, so I did not know everyone that was interviewed. A total of 10 Muslim students were interviewed, including 5 boys and 5 girls. Three of the students were of Arab descent and 7 were of South Asian origins. Four of them were born outside of the United States, bringing a different perspective to the interview. Three of the interviewees said they were not members of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) on campus. Students were also chosen from a wide range of majors, including Engineering, Molecular and Cellular Biology, Psychology, Political Science, Physics, History, and
Interviews lasted around 30-40 minutes each and were conducted at various locations around campus, including Grainger Library, the Union, and coffee shops.

When I came on campus, I quickly realized that most students formed their group of friends based on ethnicity and culture. Many of the Muslim students I met surrounded themselves mostly with other Muslim students. My interviews found that most of the Muslim students were friends with more Muslims before coming to college. This was especially true for members of the MSA. The non-MSA students said that they had Muslim friends, but were also friends with many non-Muslim students. Two of them said that they were actually friends with more non-Muslim people on campus. Only one of the MSA members said that he had an equal amount of Muslim and non-Muslim friends, although he commented that his number of Muslim friends has definitely increased since coming to the University. Muslims who arrive on campus tend to naturally gravitate towards other Muslims due to similar social lifestyle choices and the sense of belonging and community. They automatically have found a group of friends who choose to not engage in social habits such as drinking or clubbing, and instead they enjoy other leisure activities such as movies and concerts. Many also mentioned that they feel closer to Muslims on campus because they have similar belief systems and priorities. This new group of Muslim friends becomes their family away from home. However, another trend has been noted. Although Muslims arriving on campus tend to befriend other Muslims, as time passes, they also start to gain a few non-Muslim friends. They break out of their normal clique and begin to spend time with non-Muslims they have met through classes or extra-curricular activities.
A huge part of our group project dealt with ignorance, so I naturally asked students if they had experienced any acts of ignorance on campus. Acts of ignorance could be categorized as any discriminatory verbal comments or physical action within legal bounds that is directed towards a specific group of people. For the most part, Muslim students on campus said that they did not face too much outright discrimination or acts of ignorance from their peers. A few, however, did say that others treated them differently upon discovering they were Muslim. “People don’t know about Islam and at first they’re cool, but then they find out I’m Muslim and they suddenly become standoffish,” one interviewee reported. A female student said that she had just been praying earlier that day when a male non-Muslim student passed by and started laughing at her. There is a general air of ignorance dealing with Islam and Muslim culture. Even those who take a number of religious studies and Arabic classes still lack a proper background in the faith. One of the interviewees commented that a non-Muslim guy, who had taken 4 semesters of Arabic and was thought to be well-versed in the basic tenets of Islam, had believed that Ramadan was a weekend-long festival rather than a month-long fast. She went on to say that the University’s Islamic studies classes do not do a good job in educating people about the basics of Islam. One of the boys I interviewed brought up a very interesting point. He said that people who are friends with Muslims or who are around Muslims tend to be more comfortable expressing their Islamophobia. While others believed that those who are around Muslims are more educated and tolerant of Islam, this student felt that those people also feel less inhibited in joking about Muslims being terrorists or other such comments. The people who do not know many Muslims do not express their Islamophobic tendencies as blatantly. Many of those interviewed felt
that on the surface, the University campus is tolerant, but there is a strong undertone of ignorance present.

Many cited that there was a general misconception about Muslims that came out during their interactions with non-Muslims. “Muslims are backwards and terrorists. That’s what one kid told me,” said one of the interviewees. These misconceptions lead to acts of ignorance and even worse, hate crimes. Muslims are closed-minded, women-hating, conservative people. This is yet another misconception. However, a few of the students I interviewed said that they did not blame the ignorant because that is the only information they have been given about Islam. They instead blame the media and government for propagating such ideas. Many talked vehemently about how the media spins the news in order to make Muslims look like a misogynistic people. Once classic example is the Oklahoma City bombing. The initial reports after the attack stated that Islamic terrorists were most probably responsible for the deed. Soon later, it was discovered that Timothy J. McVeigh and Terry L. Nichols were the ones behind the attack. Many object to the way that the media always labels terrorists as “jihadists” or “Islamic fundamentalists” because it gives the impression that Islam promotes such horrible acts of violence. The term “jihad” is misused by the media to justify terrorism, when in fact, it actually means an internal struggle. Two of those I interviewed, however, blamed Muslims for some of the misconceptions. They believed that the Muslim ummah, or community, does not do enough to promote a good image and that we let the terrorists talk on behalf of the whole community. They suggested that the Muslim community on campus should take an active role in interfaith dialogues and that Muslim individuals should do their part in promoting a better image of the faith by becoming
active members of other organizations. Although MSA holds and Islamic Awareness Week in which they hand out flyers and have games promoting Islamic awareness, it would be better if they made an effort to invite non-Muslim students to more activities and worked on their outreach skills.

One of my main interests during this research project was how students felt about the University’s administration. The results of this question were actually quite split. Some felt that the University’s administration did not really care about the Muslim students or the minority students in general, while others felt that the University showed a lot of respect to the Muslim community on campus. The former group brought up the number of hate crimes and controversy over Chief Illiniwek. In terms of treatment of the Muslim population, many of the students talked about Nonie Darwish, a speaker brought to the University by two departments: Jewish Cultural Studies and PSAMES (the Program in South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies). Nonie is an Arab-American writer and public speaker who wrote *Now they Call Me Infidel: Why I Renounced Jihad for America, Israel and the War on Terror* and founded Arabs for Israel. In her speech, she talked about Islam as a hateful religion that oppresses women. Many of the students I talked to felt strongly offended by her basic message and said that her speech painted a bad image of Islam only supported by fallacious facts. They expressed their disappointment in the University for bringing such a speaker who had no scholarly background in the religion. It would be different if a student organization brought the speaker, but the fact that the University sponsored her meant that the University agreed with or at least condoned her hateful words. The fact that student organizations such as the KKK still exist only serve as proof that this University and its students have a long
way to go towards tolerance. Some students, on the other hand, believe that the University is very welcoming and accepting of its Muslim students. One student said, “They allow the MSA to exist and give us the same privileges as other RSOs (registered student organizations), so what do we have to complain about?” The student went on to say that the University also gives quite a bit of money to the MSA for events such as Spring Camp, a weekend-long forum about Islam held at the University. Some claim that the University does just enough so that the students do not protest, while others say that they do not expect the University to do anything more because they must treat all students equally. One thing that was proposed, however, was that the University should require all freshmen to take a world religions course. After proposing this, many of them said that this might be an issue because this is a public university and there is supposed to be a separation between education and religion.

Another main issue in my research dealt with opinions on the United States government. To tackle this issue, I asked Muslim students about their opinions on the war in Iraq. Every single student I interviewed said that they were passionately against the war. This took me by surprise because I expected that the non-Arab students or non-MSA students might be less vehement in their opposition, but I was proven wrong. All students spoke about the war being unjust and ridiculous. “I wouldn’t call it a war. There is no evidence to back it up. It’s a joke, and war has a reason,” one student stated with a half grin. Most students also commented that the war was all about oil and money. There was no connection between Osama-bin-laden and Iraq, so there was no reason for the United States to go to war with the nation. In addition, no weapons of mass destruction were found and interviewees referred to the United States as “the world’s
watchdog and policeman.” There seemed to be a bit of anger or resentment towards the government for their injustices against the Middle East. Some noted that the United States thinks of itself as being superior to the rest of the world and always looks out for its own interests. “As a super power, the United States should not be so selfish and think about the interests of others at times,” one stated. Interviewees also believed that the world was divided into an “us versus them” philosophy with the “them” being Muslim nations. The United States seems to make little effort to work with the Arab nations.

There were mixed responses when I asked students if they think the United States government is educated about Islam. Most said that they are quite ignorant of the religion and do not understand its customs or belief-system. However, there was one boy who said that the United States is very aware of Islam and that the largest library on Islam and Muslims can be found at the Pentagon. Also, he said that they would of course be educated about the religion since they want to know exactly who the enemy is. Others said that there is a lack of knowledge in the United States government. One of the girls said that in the documentary *Long Road to War*, it talks about how a man was promoted to the head of Middle Eastern affairs without any prior experience or knowledge of the Middle East. They gave him a crash course in Middle Eastern politics and then he was sent abroad and told to fix all of the problems there. Stories such as these only seem to give the impression that the United States has little time to learn about Islam. When I asked students about their views on President Bush, I was a bit surprised by their answers. Although everyone opposed his actions and ideas, some said that they think he has good intentions and that they respect him as a person since he stopped drinking and he follows his faith. “He is incompetent, but he’s not evil or crazy. He’s a God-fearing
man who is trying to complete his father’s agenda,” one boy replied. Another told me that he respected Bush for being the first president to ever declare during his time in office that Palestine should have its own state. This same boy went on to say that he should be tried in an international court of law for waging a war under false pretenses. He had an interesting idea. He told me that there should be two governments: an internal one and an external one. The external government should make it a priority to learn about different cultures and religions so that we can work on improving relations with other nations. His main grievance was that United States foreign policy was extremely inconsistent. “You can be against me, just be consistent and don’t keep switching back and forth,” he exclaimed. At one point, the United States will support a nation and a leader, but then they change their minds and rally against them. One of the most interesting stories I heard during my series of interviews came from one of the Indian Muslim boys. He told me that one of his friends at the University is studying Engineering and once received an email from the CIA saying that they were interested in having him work for them. He went to the open house and met with a CIA member the next day. The CIA representative asked him if he was fluent in Urdu, and when the student replied that he was not, the CIA man replied, “Well you knew it well enough to talk to your grandmother last night.”

One thing I noticed during my interviews was that many of the students continually switched between referring to Americans as “we” and “them.” This showed an inconsistency in how they identify themselves. When I asked them if they considered themselves patriotic, some automatically and without hesitation replied “yes.” A few, however, paused and had to take a moment before responding. “I want my nation to be
better and I push it to improve because I know it can. That makes me patriotic. I want to make this a more welcoming and tolerant nation,” responded one Arab girl in the MSA. Some were split in their answers and said that in ways they were and in other ways not. “Rebellion is needed in government to put it in check so I am patriotic to the cause,” explained one Palestinian student. When asked if they felt accepted for rejected by American society, there was also a split in answers. Some said that they had never faced any discrimination or problems for being Muslim so they felt accepted. Others said that they felt rejected and that there was already a hidden persecution going on. This hidden persecution is when a Muslim does not get a job that he is qualified for simply because of his faith. One boy explained that he knew another Muslim who could not become a pilot because he was taunted by his peers. In addition, some even thought that a large, mass detention of all Muslims was possible in the future similar in style to that depicted in the movie *The Siege*. This movie depicts a man who is deeply patriotic and yet deeply devoted to his Muslim faith. Many question whether this is a possible duality. “The innocent are still sitting in Guantanamo and nothing is being done. How often do you read about them or hear about them in the press? Never. It would be so easy for this to continue,” the Palestinian student voiced. Another boy I interviewed said, “We should not just be a Muslim in America. We should be American Muslims.” He said that he urged other Muslims around him to embrace their Muslim and ethnic roots, but they should show Americans that they love this nation. Many of the interviewees explained that they loved America for all of the opportunities it provided in terms of education and careers. They just want to help make it better for the minorities. One of the interviewees told me that he thinks America is the best nation in the world to practice Islam, better
than any of the Middle Eastern countries, because people are allowed free speech. My very last question was “do you consider yourself Muslim or American?” The reason I asked this question was to see how they responded. I wanted to know if they thought the two were opposing notions or if they thought that a person could be both simultaneously. All of the participants who were American citizens replied that they were both, but Muslim first.

Overall, I really enjoyed the research process. I was able to talk to a variety of students with varying views. I found that most students did feel a sense of underlying ignorance on campus, but thought that the educated population makes more of an effort to learn about Islam than the uneducated. They also had split views on the University. Some believed the University supported the Muslims on campus, while others thought that they should do more to promote Islamic awareness. People seemed much more opinionated when questioned about their views on the government. All students were strongly against the war in Iraq, although some were less severe on President Bush than others. One girl explained to me that she thought it was okay if the United States wanted Iraqi oil as long as they treat the Iraqis well. Others did not share this view. Students, in general, considered themselves patriotic and just wanted to see a better future for the United States in which people of all backgrounds felt free. I really did not face any problems in the interview process except that it was a bit hard for students to come up with acts of ignorance on campus. As a growing voice on campus and in the general population, Muslims can have a real impact in moving this University towards a brighter and more tolerant future.