

**De-MIST-ifying after school activities and youth programming:
Successful models for American Muslim adolescents**

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Introduction:

Having grown up and attended public high schools in the United States, we – the authors of this paper-- realize that there are several challenges that Muslim adolescents face, particularly in these politically hostile times. Yet we also feel that with the right supports and resources in place, Muslim adolescents can successfully work through these challenges, while simultaneously building on their strengths and interests. There are several ways in which Muslim adolescents can receive such support; in this paper, we focus on one successful model of a youth development program, called *Muslim Interscholastic Tournament*, or MIST.

One of the underlying assumptions guiding this paper is our belief that youth programs have the potential to support the positive youth development of adolescents, especially when they incorporate certain research-identified elements into their programs (Dryfoos, 1990; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Lerner, Alberigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Another assumption is that Muslim adolescents face unique challenges related to the intersection of their multiple identities and backgrounds (Dwyer, 2000; Eisenlohr, 1996; Ewing, 2003; Handa, 2003; Werbner, 2002).

Building on these two assumptions, we argue that youth programs must not only recognize and respond to the *general* challenges that most adolescents face; instead, they must also recognize and respond to the *unique* challenges of specific adolescent populations, while concurrently drawing upon and building on the strengths and interests that relate to their distinctive backgrounds. As it relates to Muslim adolescents growing up in the United States, this means that the youth programs must respond to the

challenges of being a religious (and sometimes racial) minority, but also to the strategic positioning of Muslim adolescents to make a positive change in their own lives and in this world, recognizing their location in multiple local and global contexts.

In the absence of studies on youth programs for Muslim adolescents in the U.S. (see Gilliat 1997 for a review of youth programs in Great Britain), this paper attempts to address a gap in the literature by exploring how MIST supports the positive youth development of its Muslim high school members. As one of the few youth programs developed expressly with the U.S. Muslim high school student in mind, MIST offers an ideal context in which to understand this area of inquiry. We begin, however, with a brief review of the literature on after school and youth programs, and on the positive youth development framework.

After school and youth programs:

Youth development programs, defined as “any structured learning activity offered during the out-of-school hours” (Perkins & Borden, 2003, p. 238), can provide adolescents with safe spaces in which youth freely explore their interests, identities, and future career paths. Further, they can help youth develop supportive peer groups and long term relationships with adults, establish a sense of belonging, take on meaningful leadership roles within the program and broader community, and help youth feel safe and valued (Gilliat, 1997; Perkins & Borden, 2003).

In order for youth programs to effectively reach these outcomes, research has found that the leaders of these organizations must not view adolescents as “problems”. Instead, they should see adolescents as resources to their communities, and as valuable

and contributing members of society. Additionally, they should encourage the active participation of youth in the development of program activities, address the needs and interests of its participant population, use a variety of activities which appeal to diverse learners, have a focus that unifies the various activities, and provide ample opportunities for youth to build positive long-term relationships with both adults and peers (Deschenes, et al, 2004; Dryfoos, 1990; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Programs that follow this advice can help contribute to the positive youth development of adolescents.

The phrase “positive youth development” refers to a specific approach towards adolescent development. Within this perspective, it is important to understand adolescents’ challenges; however, the focus remains on envisioning adolescents as valuable resources to the community, as opposed to “troublemakers” or societal problems (Lerner, et al., 2005). Damon’s (2004) description of positive youth development illustrates how this is possible. He states,

While the positive youth development approach recognizes the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect children in various ways, it resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risk. Instead, it begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world. (Damon, 2004, p. 15).

Though there is a growing body of literature that describes how youth programs can help support the positive youth development of adolescents, there are few studies that look explicitly at youth programs that cater to Muslim adolescents living in the United States. To begin to address this gap in research, in the next section we describe the practices of MIST in order to demonstrate how a program can incorporate elements of effective youth programming for Muslim adolescents, helping to support their positive youth development.

Muslim Interscholastic Tournament:

The Muslim Interscholastic Tournament, or MIST, was initiated in 2001 in Houston, Texas because, reflecting on their own experiences, recent high school graduates felt there was a need for a program that could guide high school students in all aspects of their academic and personal life. These graduates felt that high school students needed a place where they could belong and where they could feel as though they were contributing to their future careers as well as their communities. In order to respond to this need, they decided to create a tournament that combined many aspects of the academic arenas, including art, writing, and community service. It was their hope that this tournament would promote healthy competition while driving students to excel in whatever talents they had.

With the help and encouragement of several dedicated members of the Houston community, along with the Muslim Student Association at the University of Houston, the first tournament took place in 2002 with about 150 students from Houston, Austin, and Dallas. Due to its success, the MIST board decided to venture out of Texas to see if the idea would be successful elsewhere. The Washington DC region appeared to be a natural second location for a regional MIST because of the heavy concentration of Muslims. Their first MIST Regional was held in 2003. MIST then expanded to Atlanta and Boston in 2004, and New York in 2005. Several other regions (within and outside the United States) have also been in the process of introducing MIST to their communities on a smaller scale. MIST currently has over 1,000 high school participants and 75

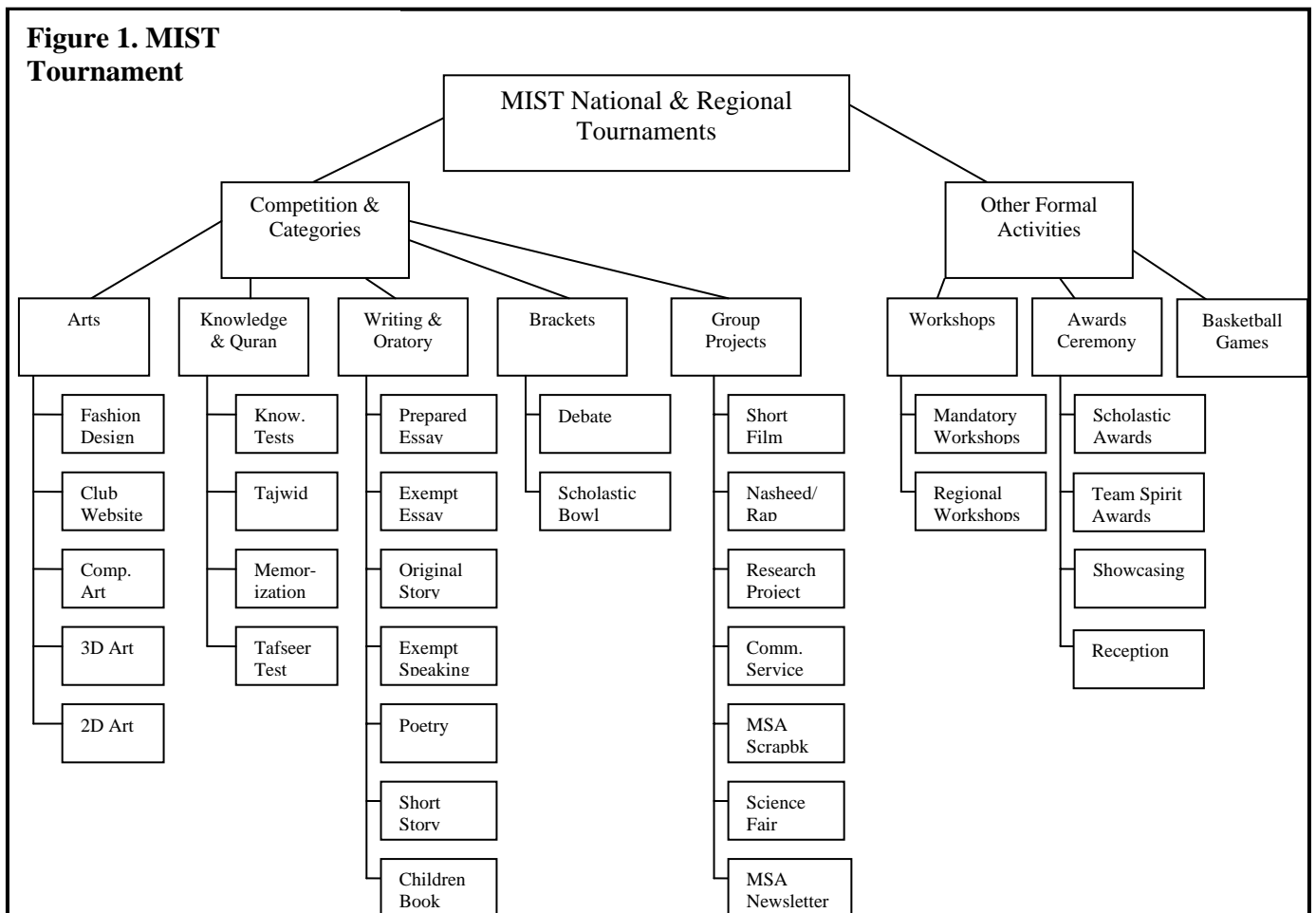
participating high schools nationwide, and has recently joined forces with MSA National in order to bridge the gap between college and high school MSAs.

Although it has not always been formally articulated as such, the mission of MIST is to bring high school students together from around the nation to develop leadership, promote communication, and inspire creativity in order to develop a strong Muslim identity. At its core, MIST is dedicated to empowering high school students to be motivated and active within their community. Guiding this mission statement is the belief that active high school students become active college students, and consequently, active college students become active adults within their community. By giving high school students a venue to excel in the arts, sciences, and humanities, MIST board members believe that they grow up knowing not only that they can be important members of their various communities, but important contributors as well.

Since the topics and workshops are geared towards developing critical thinking skills while promoting a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims, MIST is a great educational opportunity for anyone who is interested in broadening their socio-environmental knowledge. Hence, MIST organizers encourage people of all different faiths and backgrounds to be a part of their high school MIST team. With so much going on in the world today, the organizers feel that understanding the faith of over a billion inhabitants of our planet has never been more important. Through MIST, they hope to train the future leaders of this world with the right tools to garner a global environment of respect, understanding, and peace.

MIST attempts to fulfill this mission through its activities and tournaments. These tournaments last from two to three days and typically conclude with an awards

ceremony. MIST currently features twenty-six different competitions, many of which are listed in the diagram below. In addition to the competitions, the tournaments feature an educational program of workshops and other activities. Both the competitions and the workshops draw upon the tournament’s yearly theme, which is selected for its timeliness and importance to the masses. The annual theme and workshops aim to provide students with the necessary tools to excel in their personal careers, to help their MSA after school clubs thrive, and to contribute to their communities.



MIST Outcomes:

There are many aspects of MIST that we believe support the positive youth development of its high school students. Specifically, this youth program provides a venue where high school students themselves are the stars of the show from beginning to end without anyone limiting their creativity. For example, every year, MIST organizers call students to submit proposals to introduce new competitions and activities to MIST, as well as marketing material for MIST, offering bonus points as an incentive to actively take initiative. Organizers often ask dedicated high school students to review and revise old and new MIST competition guidelines. One high school student is delegated as a liaison between MIST and the school and is given the task of bringing on board as many people as possible from their school- thus reaching out to a large majority of Muslims who are not usually seen at the places that most Islamic programs are advertised (masajid, conferences, etc). Through these responsibilities, it is hoped that the students feel a sense of achievement and responsibility that helps them develop their identity.

The MIST competitions and workshops also help students increase their knowledge of Islam while expanding their critical thinking skills. Students apply and expand what they learn from classes at school and think of ways to reflect an Islamic perspective through mediums like art, poetry, or even oratory. In order to do this, students have to study and think about Islam, put it into perspective, and relate it to themselves. During this process, students are encouraged to critically analyze everything in their life and discover what they are looking for. Through the community service projects, science fair, and essays dealing with world issues, students' minds are stimulated to create valuable work that can lead to Muslim contributions to research, literature, and community work in their broader societies. In the post-9/11 world, MIST

also empowers Muslim adolescents with the tools needed to deal with a politically hostile environment through its workshops, many of which directly discuss how they may be dealing with society and the situations students might be going through.

Additionally, MIST allows students to step outside the box of their individual high schools by taking part in regional tournaments with people they have never met before from various locations. This gives students a better understanding of people from different backgrounds. In addition to this, through the workshops and projects submitted through the competitions, students are able to teach and learn from their peers. Students meet others with similar talents and are thus able to network. Students also develop supportive peer groups and long-term relationships with the Muslims in their own schools because MIST encourages them to form MSAs, and cliques within those MSAs are shattered when students all unite together to take part in MIST.

Muslim youth often feel insignificant or isolated within their high schools. By taking part in a program with over 1,000 participants nationwide, high school students are able to feel as though they are part of a grander whole. An anonymous MIST high school participant states, "MIST, in many ways, was an opening of doors for me. I met so many sincere sisters there, many of whom are dear friends now. It allowed me to feel a part of something larger, a sensation of the grandeur of unity. It helped me feel like it was cool to be a Muslim, and that Muslim people, too, are capable of great triumphs, achievements, and feats of originality. In some deeper way, it was not only a gathering of people, but a coming together of minds, hearts, and spirits, the memory of which will stand vividly in my mind." This testimonial, found on the MIST website, illustrates how

the MIST tournaments result in a powerful and moving experience for many of its participants.

Through this description, it appears as though several characteristics of effective youth programs are incorporated within MIST—for example, a yearly theme provides MIST with a clear focus; numerous competition categories appeal to diverse learners; and interaction with peers and adults provide youth with the opportunity to establish long-term relationships. This description also begins to describe *how* these characteristics are applied to the specific population of Muslim adolescents who are growing up and attending public high schools in the United States. Yet in order to understand this more thoroughly, empirical research is required. Still, with this brief description, we feel it is possible for others in the field to begin to explore how their own youth programs can attempt to incorporate these elements in a way that is most responsive to their student population.

Conclusion:

Damon (2004) states that the positive youth development approach aims at “understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than at correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies or so-called disabilities” (p. 15). Through this description of MIST, it appears that the program does indeed focus on educating and engaging their high school participants by providing youth with creative outlets for them to learn and grow.

As we continue to examine the effectiveness of youth development programs and their ability to support adolescent’s development, we recognize the

need for more empirical data to more thoroughly examine the relationship between the two. Yet we feel that with continued reflection, research, and refinement, MIST and other youth programs can more effectively provide the support adolescents need in order to develop into strong, contributing members of their societies.

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