We, the undersigned faculty, are scholars of Islam and Muslim societies who teach at fourteen public and private universities within the Big Ten Academic Alliance, a network comprising over half a million students in eleven states. We are also active members of a consortium, the Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum (DISC), which enables students from across the Big Ten to take courses covering the history, society, culture, and politics of Muslim societies past and present. On January 17, 2017, President Trump released the first of two Executive Orders titled “Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”. Shortly after, we saw the release of a revised version which went public on March 6, 2017. Such Orders that single out citizens of particular Muslim-majority countries for differential treatment in immigration policy should be reconsidered within an educational context.

As scholars of Islam and Muslim societies, we believe that the Executive Orders stand in contradiction to the values of diversity and inclusiveness, to the free movement of peoples and free exchange of ideas on which collaborative inquiry depends, and to the overarching goal of well-informed mutual understanding. We enact and advocate for these notions in our teaching and research, and our universities are based intellectually and institutionally on such values and ideals. But it is important to stress that sound public policy and good governance also depend, in part, on such values, ideals, and pursuits; moreover, policy and governance have historically been informed by the fruits of university labor. Our government’s value of these notions have been brought into question by the president’s Orders and we hope that in reaching out we are able to encourage our representatives to reconsider the impact of the Executive Orders within this context.

These Orders have adversely affected our students, our colleagues, their families, and the very ability to conduct the critical research we need now more than ever. Students and faculty at our universities have found themselves incapable of leaving the country to conduct research, attend academic conferences, or visit family. In some cases, students and faculty who were abroad when the initial Order was enacted found themselves stranded overseas. We have seen individuals from the selected countries, as well as from other Muslim-majority countries, withdraw their applications to study at our institutions. Significantly, the uncertainty and chaos surrounding the Orders have impacted Muslim students who are not from the countries they targeted, just as they have impacted lawful permanent residents who are from these countries, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Their justifiable anxieties about future measures that may expand on the current Orders, more closely approximating the “total and complete shutdown” of Muslims entering the United States on which President Trump campaigned, have had an injurious impact on these students’ intellectual and personal lives, and even their mental health.

Along with many national security professionals, we also believe that these Executive Orders, and any future iterations of them, are an overly broad-stroked approach to combatting terrorism that will not only be ineffective in achieving its aims, but will also likely undermine national security interests and the safety of Americans travelling abroad. Notably, the countries banned by these Orders are not those that have incubated any deadly terrorist acts on US soil. As scholars of Islam and citizens/residents of the United States, we believe these are important facts to consider. Associating terrorism so boldly with so much of the Muslim population not only undermines our relationships with these countries and their constituents, but also paints Muslim-Americans in a bad light and only perpetuates negative stereotypes about our American neighbors.
With this in mind, we would like to highlight the educational resources available at our institutions and through consortiums like ours to educate legislators such as yourself on topics related to Islam and the Muslim world. Through the Digital Islamic Studies Curriculum (DISC) we are able to offer Islamic Studies courses at 15 campuses across the US. Our program takes advantage of the curricular strengths of any one university and makes them accessible to others within the Big Ten Academic Alliance. With such a vast variety of resources at our fingertips, we would like to encourage students, legislators, and the public at large to seek out academic resources, such as this, to learn more about Islam and contemporary and historical Muslim societies. At a time like this, educational resources should be leveraged to inform immigration policy. We encourage you to utilize us, our peers, and our resources to educate yourselves and constituents about these issues.

Signed,

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Valerie Hoffman; Professor and Head of the Department of Religion, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
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