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**“Introducing the University Back Channel:
The Educational Solutions Web-Based Dialogue Forum for
Islamic and Western Professors and their Students”**

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The Challenge: In this era of terrorist attacks, war, and inflammatory rhetoric, we at Educational Solutions (ES) believe the world is deprived of true dialogue between Islam and the West. The issues are complex with many unrecognized shades of opinion on both sides. Mass media too often acts to polarize and present partial perspectives rather than inform in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, both Western and Islamic societies have political agendas that suppress open discussion of sensitive issues.

The Mission: Educational Solutions’ mission is to increase intercultural understanding between Islam and the West by engaging university professors and their students in meaningful, free and civil dialogue. Educational Solutions will use available Internet technology on a large scale to create the University Back Channel, a global web-based forum. “Back channel,” a phrase coined by diplomats, is an informal, unofficial channel of communication between opposing sides of a dispute. We have chosen this name for our forum because we want to include the voices of university students and their professors in the search for mutual understanding and peace.

Educational Solutions recognizes the need to engage moderate professors on both sides as a starting point for civil dialogue. In the U.S., Muslim professors and their students will dialogue with non-Muslim professors and their students. Many American-Muslim scholars, who have chosen to live and teach in the West, are creatively advancing mutual understanding and critiques of both cultures. They have much to discuss with non-Muslim-Americans. Other dialogues will be international in scope, linking moderate professors and their students in Islamic countries with their counterparts in the West. As our dialogue process becomes widely accepted, we will set up dialogues between moderates and conservatives within both the Western and Muslim communities. Common to all dialogues will be the informed discussion of issues crucial to Islamic and Western intercultural understanding.

The Project: There are three components to the ES University Back Channel: ES Dialogue Kits, the ES Website, and the ES Digital Library. The issue-specific Dialogue Kits are designed for use as two-week course inserts to enrich relevant university curricula and prepare students to dialogue over the ES Website. The Dialogue Kits include videotaped discussions by high-profile scholars and experts modeling meaningful dialogue. These high-profile dialogues, which will also be broadcast on television, are

important to reach a wider audience and to promote the ES dialogue process. The ES Digital Library will preserve and distribute supplementary balanced information on divisive issues and shared concerns.

The ES goal is to use these components to serve over 60,000 students and an estimated 3000 Western and Muslim professors by 2008.