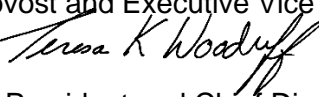



MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

October 27, 2021

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Steering Committee

FROM: Teresa K. Woodruff, Ph.D., Provost and Executive Vice
President for Academic Affairs 
Jabbar R. Bennett, Ph.D., Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer


SUBJECT: Proposed Changes to the Religious Observance Policy

On behalf of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Steering Committee (DEISC) co-chairs, Wanda Lipscomb, Ph.D., and Luis Alonzo Garcia, we submit the attached revised *Religious Observance Policy* for endorsement and submission to academic governance for review and approval. The recommended path for review is with student groups (ASMSU & COGS) and the UCFA first and then to the University Council for final review and endorsement.



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Background

Michigan State University is a home for a vibrant, diverse, and multicultural community of students, faculty, and staff, and we value and actively support that diversity, including the diversity of spiritual expression and practice. Therefore, it is the policy of the University to enable students and faculty to observe those holidays set aside by their chosen religious faith. As Michigan State University has become increasingly multicultural, the incidence of conflicts between mandatory academic requirements and religious observances has increased. In the absence of a simple and dignified way to determine the validity of individual claims, the claim of a religious conflict should be accepted at face value.

Despite a long-standing policy to avoid such conflicts and to make reasonable accommodations for individual cases, students continue to report conflicts in our courses that have not been addressed.

The [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan and Report](#) identified the following recommendation:

Strategic Goal Area – Ensure Equity, Recommendation Four: University Religious Observance Policy/(Page 56)

“Review and revise the university’s Religious Observance Policy to create greater inclusivity”

The first recommend action is:

“Academic Governance to consider recommendations for a revised Religious Observance Policy developed in consultation with members of the Department of Religious Studies and submitted by the informal Education Work Group of the DEISC.”

This memorandum provides a summary of the main substantive changes to the *Religious Observance Policy* which was developed by the DEISC in consultation with members of the Department of Religious Studies.

Policy Development Process

Members of the working group of the DEI Steering Committee drafted the new recommended *Religious Observance Policy* in response to many long-standing complaints by faculty, staff, and students, as well as in response to complaints and recommendations that were heard in listening sessions that the DEI Steering Committee held with different student groups, alumni groups, and faculty. The working group consulted with relevant stakeholders on campus such as the Directors of Muslim Studies and the Asian Studies Center, as well as the department chair and relevant members of the Department of Religious Studies. The working group also examined over a dozen such policies at different universities, noting areas that would strengthen MSU’s policy.

Summary of Main Substantive Changes

1. Distinguishes and outlines religious accommodations by impact to students, faculty/academic staff, and the entire MSU community.
2. Identifies and lists specific religious holidays, where to find the dates of the religious holidays, as well as helpful information about the observance timing for Islamic and Jewish holidays (e.g., Shabbat, Ramadan, Yom Kippur).
3. Outlines several practical ways instructors can provide religious accommodations for students who miss class, assignments, or exams to observe a religious holiday, such as:
 - a. Instructors must refrain from scheduling exams and oral presentations during the major holidays of non-Christian religions that have a presence on campus (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). If a Professor mistakenly has scheduled such an exam or oral presentation, exams must be reasonably rescheduled without academic penalty.

- b. Absences for religious reasons may not be counted as a missed class in any course in which attendance is a measure of academic performance. A blanket policy for absences should not be applied to religious observances, as this penalizes religions with more observances that require absences than others.
 - c. Instructors must refer to the Religious Observance Policy in their syllabi.
 - d. Reasonable extensions of time must be given, without academic penalty, for missed assignments; students must be allowed to schedule presentations around religious absences.
4. Recommends that during fasts for religious holidays such as Yom Kippur and Ramadan, accommodations should be made for fasting students on meal plans (e.g., one cafeteria in each part of campus that is open after sunset).
 5. Reinforces that academic and administrative units be sensitive to the observance of religious holidays so that faculty and staff who absent themselves from unit activities on these days are not negatively impacted.
 6. Encourages administrators, instructors, and students to consult the list of religious holidays and observances on the Provost website when planning administrative activities, courses, faculty meetings, assignments, and similar activities.
 7. Recommends that all units on campus get a calendar every year that identifies all major cultural and religious holidays for the following two years, so that a real effort can be made to refrain from holding events on these holidays, to avoid (at the minimum) being insensitive, or even discriminatory in their effect.

Attachments

Cc: Samuel L. Stanley, Jr., M.D., President
Vennie Gore, M.S. Ed., Senior Vice President for Student Life and Engagement
Thomas D. Jeitschko, Ph.D., Senior Associate Provost, Associate Provost for Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and Dean of the Graduate School
N. Suzanne Lang, Ph.D., Associate Provost and Associate Vice President for the Office for Faculty and Academic Staff Affairs
Mark A. Largent, Ph.D., Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Luis Garcia, DEI Steering Committee Co-Chair, Director, Migrant Student Services
Wanda Lipscomb, Ph.D., DEI Steering Committee Co-Chair, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry; Senior Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion, College of Human Medicine

Current Policy on Religious Observance

Michigan State University Office of the Registrar

Academic Programs Catalog

General Information, Policies, Procedures and Regulations

General Procedures and Regulations Policy on Religious Observance

It has always been the policy of the University to permit students and faculty to observe those holidays set aside by their chosen religious faith.

The faculty and staff should be sensitive to the observance of these holidays so that students who absent themselves from classes on these days are not seriously disadvantaged. It is the responsibility of those students who wish to be absent to make arrangements in advance with their instructors. It is also the responsibility of those faculty who wish to be absent to make arrangements in advance with their chairpersons, who shall assume the responsibility for covering their classes.

As Michigan State University has become increasingly multicultural, the incidence of conflicts between mandatory academic requirements and religious observances has increased. In the absence of a simple and dignified way to determine the validity of individual claims, the claim of a religious conflict should be accepted at face value. Be aware that some degrees of observance may have a more extensive period of observance. Instructors may expect a reasonable limit to the number of requests by any one student. Some instructors attempt to cover all reasons for student absences from required academic events such as quizzes or exams with a blanket policy, e.g., allowing the student to drop one grade or two quizzes without penalty. If this is meant to extend to religious observances, the instructor should state this clearly at the beginning of the term. If instructors require make-up exams, they retain the right to determine the content of the exams and the conditions of administration, giving due consideration to equitable treatment.

Proposed Revised Michigan State University Policy on Religious Observance

Purpose

Michigan State University is a home for a vibrant, diverse, and multicultural community of students, faculty, and staff, and we value and actively support that diversity, including the diversity of spiritual expression and practice. Therefore, it is the policy of the University to enable students and faculty¹ to observe those holidays set aside by their chosen religious faith. As Michigan State University has become increasingly multicultural, the incidence of conflicts between mandatory academic requirements and religious observances has increased. In the absence of a simple and dignified way to determine the validity of individual claims, the claim of a religious conflict should be accepted at face value. Despite a long-standing faculty policy to avoid such conflicts and to make reasonable accommodations for individual cases, students continue to report conflicts in our courses that have not been addressed.

Applicability

This policy states institutional and individual expectations for faculty, academic staff, support staff, executive managers, and students to enable students and faculty to observe those holidays set aside by their chosen religious faith.

Requirements that impact students: The faculty and staff must be sensitive to the observance of these holidays so that students who absent themselves from classes on these days are not disadvantaged in any way. Students who miss class, assignments, or exams to observe a religious holiday must be accommodated in ways that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (1) Professors and Instructors must refrain from scheduling exams and oral presentations during the major holidays of religions that have a presence on campus (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). If a Professor mistakenly has scheduled such an exam or oral presentation, exams must be reasonably rescheduled without academic penalty.
- (2) Absences may not be counted as a missed class in any course in which attendance is a measure of academic performance. Some instructors attempt to cover all reasons for student absences from required academic events such as quizzes or exams with a blanket policy, e.g., allowing the student to drop one grade or two quizzes without penalty, or allowing a certain number of “unexcused” absences during the course of a semester. This kind of policy should not be applied to religious observances, as this penalizes religions with more observances that require absences than others.
- (3) Reasonable extensions of time must be given, without academic penalty, for missed assignments; students must be allowed to schedule presentations around such absences. Make-up work should be appropriate and not more difficult than the original assignment.
- (4) It is the responsibility of those students who wish to be absent to make arrangements in advance with their instructors, and to catch up on any material discussed and assignments given during that class period. Accommodations must never fundamentally alter an essential requirement of the course or academic program.
- (5) All faculty must refer to this religious policy in their syllabi.

¹ The term faculty is used broadly throughout this policy and is intended to cover both faculty and academic staff.

- (6) Orientation programs for new students -- including the orientations for international students -- must inform incoming students about this policy and urge them to check for conflicts before the deadline for informing their instructors.

Recommendations that impact faculty and staff:

1. Academic and administrative units should be sensitive to the observance of these holidays so that faculty and staff who absent themselves from unit activities on these days are not negatively impacted and, where appropriate and available, have the opportunity to adjust their schedules or to use accumulated leave time. Units are also encouraged to plan major activities and professional meetings (e.g., the opening night of a major performance; a major exhibit or lecture, a major faculty meeting) in a way that avoids such conflicts.
2. To avoid such competing demands, administrators, instructors, and students are encouraged to consult the list of religious holidays and observances on the Provost website when planning administrative activities, courses, faculty meetings, assignments and similar activities. It is also recommended that all units on campus get a calendar every year that identifies all major cultural and religious holidays for the following two years, so that a real effort can be made to refrain from holding events on these holidays, to avoid (at the minimum) being insensitive, or even discriminatory in their effect. Doing so can also serve an educational purpose in educating the community about diverse holidays.

Recommendations that impact the entire MSU community:

In public spaces, promoting one religious or cultural practice or observance to the exclusion or diminution of others (e.g., through religiously related symbols or holiday decorations) is inconsistent with the University's status as a public institution and its commitment to inclusions.

Information on holidays:

Holidays observed by many members of the university community include, but are not limited to: Kwanzaa, Rosh Hashanah; Yom Kippur; Sukkot; Passover; Shavuot; 'Id al-Fitr; 'Id al-Adha, Good Friday, Vesak, Mahavir Jayanti, Vaisakhi, Guru Nanak Gurburab, Divali, Holi, Pongal/Makar Sankranti, Durga Puja/Dussehra, Chinese New Year, Dr. Ambedkar's birthday, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday and Juneteenth. Information about these holidays and the dates of their observance is available on the web page maintained by the Provost. More detailed information is also available on this web site.

Please note that Jewish holidays begin at sundown the evening before the date listed. Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, is observed weekly from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday and during this time observant Jews are required to refrain from work, use of electricity and other activities. Be aware that some degrees of observance may have a more extensive period of observance.

Islamic holidays are based on the lunar calendar and will be celebrated approximately around the dates listed. During Ramadan faculty should make final exam accommodations for students who fast. Students should have the opportunity to take an exam currently scheduled for late in the day at some point in the morning. The Testing Center is available to provide accommodation for fasting students free of charge if the department cannot accommodate the student. During fasts for religious holidays such as Yom Kippur and Ramadan accommodations should be made for fasting students on meal plans. For instance, there should be one cafeteria in each part of campus that is open after sunset. If opening a cafeteria before dawn is not feasible, the university should make an effort to distribute packages of food the night before in place of breakfast.