

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 should make every effort to avoid scheduling exams and oral presentations during the major holidays of religions that have a presence on campus (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). If a professor 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 holidays 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 need to be absent to inform their instructor at least two weeks before the holiday, 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.

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

- (5) All faculty must refer to this religious policy in their syllabi as well as provide the deadline in the syllabus by which students need to inform instructors of a conflict. Faculty should remind students of the deadline during the first day of class.
- (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 [LINK TO BE ADDED] 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 Gurpurab, Divali, Holi, Pongal/Makar Sankranti, Durga Puja/Dussehra, Lunar 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 [LINK TO BE ADDED]. More detailed information is also available on this web site.

Please note that Jewish holidays – including the weekly observance of the sabbath - begin at sundown the evening before the date listed. Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, is observed weekly from before sundown on Friday to sundown (when three stars are visible) on Saturday and during this time observant Jews are required to refrain from work, use of electricity and other activities. Be aware that more observant Jews will have a more extensive period of observance for some holidays and will need to take off work for more holidays.

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 for students fasting on Ramadan.