

February 22, 2021

President Tommy G. Thompson
1720 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706

Board of Regents
1860 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Dr.
Madison, WI 53706

VIA EMAIL

Dear President Thompson and the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents:

We are writing today regarding the unfortunate conflict between the start date for six UW System campuses and the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, which marks the beginning of the Jewish New Year and the period considered the High Holy Days ([Jewish Holiday Calendar 2020-2025](#)).

Rosh Hashanah begins the evening of Monday, September 6 and ends sundown on Wednesday, September 8. UW-La Crosse, UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Parkside, UW-Stout and UW-Superior begin fall semester instruction during the Jewish holiday on Tuesday, September 7 and Wednesday, September 8. Factors that likely led to the conflict this fall are specific to the cycles of the Gregorian and Jewish Lunar calendars and further complicated by state laws regarding the start of the academic year. This potential for conflict is exacerbated whenever Labor Day comes late, and Rosh Hashanah comes early.

The fall start date in 2021 is particularly problematic from a welcoming and inclusion perspective and creates challenges for faculty, staff and students. No student or faculty member should be forced to make a choice between attending the first day of classes and observing a religious holiday. This conflict could have, and ought to have been, avoided by those who set the schedule several years ago, had the campuses elected to start school the prior week on one of the legally permissible days.

There is precedent for changing the UW System academic calendar as it relates to holidays. President Thompson may recall a similar situation in 1994, when Labor Day was on September 5, and Rosh Hashanah began on September 6. The difference between the 2021 and 1994 calendar was that the Thursday before Labor Day was September 1, and state law prohibits schools from starting on September 1. In turn, legislation was proposed, and Governor Thompson signed 1993 Assembly Bill 841, which allowed the UW System to commence the fall semester on September 1, 1994—a one-time accommodation to avoid the start of classes on Rosh Hashanah. Fortunately, fall 2021 is a slightly different situation, as Labor Day is September 6, providing Wisconsin schools with more options to start classes before the holiday weekend.

In fact, the majority of UW System schools will start on September 2 this year. The six UW System campuses starting fall instruction on Rosh Hashanah have the flexibility to move their start dates to one of three dates—September 2, 3 or 9—with Thursday, September 2 being the likely optimal date. Current law allows schools to start classes on the 2nd, prior to the Jewish holiday.

Schools in Wisconsin are belatedly recognizing the conflict and adjusting calendars to accommodate the holiday. Recently, the Madison Metropolitan School District informed the Madison Jewish Federation that it has changed its start date to September 1, 2021 and has tasked its inclusion team to work with area faith groups to review calendaring going forward.

This conflict is about equity. We are not asking schools to cancel instruction for all religious observances, but for schools to consider *all* communities in a transparent and inclusive process for setting the academic calendar well in advance to avoid conflicts whenever possible.

Starting fall instruction on Rosh Hashanah, the holiest time on the Jewish calendar, sets an unwelcoming and exclusionary tone for the Jewish community across campuses and is in direct conflict with the System's own stated inclusion planning process, the [University of Wisconsin Inclusive Excellence](#):

“Inclusive Excellence is a planning process intended to help each UW System institution establish a comprehensive and well-coordinated set of systemic actions that focus specifically on fostering greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability at every level of university life. The central premise of Inclusive Excellence holds that UW System colleges and universities need to intentionally integrate their diversity efforts into the core aspects of their institutions—such as their academic priorities, leadership, quality improvement initiatives, decision-making, day-to-day operations, and organizational cultures—in order to maximize their success.”

Unfortunately, inclusion, equity and diversity efforts were *not* integrated in the UW System institutions' planning processes and decision-making when scheduling the start of fall 2021 instruction on Rosh Hashanah. To create welcoming and respectful school and workplace environments, diligent efforts should be made to accommodate observance of religious holidays that extend beyond certain legal obligations. Even when absences are excused for religious observance, missing the first few days of the school year can raise significant challenges for students and faculty. The first days of instruction are important for introductions, establishing initial rapport between students and teachers and learning about educators' expectations for the coming year or class.

None of us—administration, students, staff, faculty, nor the broader community—should find ourselves in this situation. We hope going forward that the UW System will address this conflict in a manner that recognizes the diversity of our broader community. We believe this is an opportunity for both correction and reflection to devote more attention to equity in public schools, and we hope to participate in a dialogue about the larger Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework. There is still time to address this error and make it right.

We look forward to hearing from you. In the meantime, our point of contact is Michael Blumenfeld, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, 608/575-8018 or mblumenfeld@mblumenfeld.com.

Sincerely,



Michael H. Blumenfeld, Executive Director
Wisconsin Jewish Conference



Rabbi Steve Adams, President
Wisconsin Council of Rabbis



Miryam Rosenzweig, President and CEO
Milwaukee Jewish Federation



Jenny Tasse, Director
Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation



Alan Klugman, Executive Director
Jewish Federation of Madison

Cc:

Chancellor Rebecca Blank
Chancellor Debbie Ford
Chancellor Katherine P. Frank
Chancellor Joe Gow
Chancellor Andrew Leavitt
Chancellor Dr. Renée Wachter