



April 23, 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

BY EMAIL

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

It has come to our attention that there is an 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 holiest period in the Jewish calendar, the High Holy Days. 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 all begin fall semester instruction during the Jewish holiday on Tuesday, September 7 and Wednesday, September 8.

Our colleague Greg Steinberger, President/CEO of UW Hillel Foundation, has had numerous discussions on this matter with UW officials and memorialized UW Hillel's concerns in a letter to UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank. In addition, we understand that many in the Wisconsin Jewish community have expressed to you their deep concern about this conflict, including the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, Milwaukee Jewish Federation, Jewish Federation of Madison, Wisconsin Council of Rabbis, and the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation.

Hillel International, the world's largest Jewish student organization active on over 550 campuses, wishes to add its voice to the concerns expressed by Mr. Steinberger and the Wisconsin Jewish community leadership. Hillel's mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world. For nearly a century, Hillel International's network of student leaders, professionals, and volunteers on college campuses around the world have encouraged generations of young adults of all



backgrounds to celebrate learning, pursue social justice, and connect to their peers through programming and authentic relationship building.

A critical part of Hillel's mission is to partner with universities to assure a campus climate that fosters greater diversity, equity, and inclusion for all students at every level of university life. We believe that no student should be forced to make a choice between attending the first day of classes and observing an important religious holiday. Unfortunately, starting fall instruction on Rosh Hashanah, among the very holiest times on the Jewish calendar, sets an unwelcoming and exclusionary tone for the Jewish community across campuses and is in direct conflict with the UW System's own stated inclusion planning process. This conflict could have, and ought to have, been avoided by those who set the University calendar several years ago.

Hillel and our Jewish community partners do not seek to have classes cancelled for all religious observances. Rather, we seek to have the University consider all communities' needs in a transparent and inclusive process for setting the academic calendar well in advance to avoid these types of conflicts whenever possible. We are encouraged by the responses we have seen thus far from you, President Thompson, and Chancellor Blank affirming that the University of Wisconsin will take transparent and focused steps to review future academic calendars, identify any potential conflicts with religious observances, and take affirmative steps to avoid them whenever possible or provide needed accommodations.

We also bring to your attention an important opportunity for the University to address campus antisemitism which, as Greg Steinberger noted in a recent [Daily Cardinal](#) interview, "is more prevalent than ever, and we are at risk of going down a very dangerous path if it remains unchecked." To meet this challenge Hillel International this year launched a Campus Climate Initiative to partner with campus administrators to foster a positive environment in which Jewish students can express their identities and values, free of harassment, hostility, or marginalization. Our work is intended to advance the university's existing commitment to diversity by fostering a campus environment in which all students can engage meaningfully and respectfully with diverse peers and viewpoints. Hillel is piloting this initiative at eight universities this year and will launch a second cohort during the 2021-22 academic year. Your participation not only would support UW's diversity and inclusion goals, but would offer the University an opportunity to become an exemplar and leader in the field. Please reach out to Mr. Steinberger for further details.



Thank you for your careful attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Adam Lehman  
President & CEO

Mark B. Rotenberg  
Vice President, University Initiatives & Legal Affairs