



March 30, 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:

I am Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Executive Director of Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice. We are a state-wide education and advocacy organization working toward social justice and interfaith understanding. It is part of our mission to raise awareness and build sensitivity toward the rich diversity of faith traditions that make up our state. In that light, I am reaching out to you today to ask you to respect the holiest season of the Jewish calendar and refrain from holding the first day of the fall semester on Rosh HaShanah – the Jewish New Year.

For the Jewish community, Rosh HaShanah is one of the holiest days of the year. It is the beginning of a ten-day period of reflection and repentance, culminating in Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Rosh HaShanah observance centers on worship services in synagogue that take place for most of the day. Like all Jewish holidays, Rosh HaShanah takes place from sundown to sundown. This year, it begins at sundown on September 6 and ends at sundown on September 8.

It is untenable to ask Jewish students to have to choose between their religious observance and the first day of the semester. Starting out the semester having missed the first day of class puts Jewish students at a disadvantage from the get-go. The first day of class establishes classroom norms and culture; introduces the student to the professor and the professor to the student; is the first, best, opportunity to get the syllabus, ask questions, and find out the expectations for the class.

For Jewish students faced with this difficult choice, their initial impression of the campus culture is one of unwelcome. The first message they receive from the university is ‘we don’t care about your religion and, by extension, we don’t care about you’.

22 Chautauqua Trail, Madison, WI 53719 Phone: 608-513-7121 Email: wifaithvoices4justice@gmail.com

The mission of Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice is to draw on the wisdom, courage, and strength of our various faith traditions to advance the common good. As progressive people of faith committed to crossing religious boundaries, we uphold the dignity of all human beings. Through advocacy, education, and partnership, we lift the voices of those who are underserved.

I am certain that these are not the true feelings of the UW system nor of its leadership. I understand that the UW Inclusive Excellence planning process is intended specifically to avoid these types of ethnic and cultural misunderstandings. In this instance, somewhere along the line a ball was dropped. It is not too late to correct the error, as other school systems have done. Other UW campuses are starting school on September 2. This seems a reasonable and very do-able option.

I hope you will take these concerns very seriously and make the necessary change and ensure that all UW campuses are welcoming and inclusive to *all* their students.

Thank you very much for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Rabbi Bonnie Margulis
Executive Director
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
608-513-7121

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

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