



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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

Board of Regents
University of Wisconsin System
1860 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706

Submitted via email.

May 17, 2021

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

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I urge you to reconsider the timing of the 2021 start dates for six of 13 University of Wisconsin (UW) System campuses that are scheduled to occur on Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest observances within the Jewish faith tradition.

Our nation is founded upon the principal that religious freedom is an inalienable right and that all should be free to witness to their faith in places of worship, the marketplace, and in the public square. The Wisconsin Constitution affirms that the right to worship “shall never be infringed” ([Article I, Section 18](#)) and Wisconsin law requires employers to reasonably accommodate their employees’ religious observance or practice (Wis. Stat. s. [111.337\(1\)](#)).

Public policy and our public institutions, especially those charged with shaping our state’s leaders, must ensure that the free exercise of faith is encouraged, rather than encumbered. We therefore join with other faith leaders in support of the request by the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, the Wisconsin Council of Rabbis, and numerous others to move the 2021 start date of classes at UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Parkside, UW-Superior, UW-Stout and UW-La Crosse to September 2, 3, or 9. This reasonable request does not require any loss of instruction. Rather, a shift in start dates would affirm that the UW System values the faith that supports and sustains its students, faculty, and staff, through the challenges of the coming academic year.

Beyond the challenges of campus life, our state’s universities must prepare students for times of exceptional difficulty, such as those we have experienced this past year. Higher education aims to cultivate character and develop an innate sense of decency - a reflex toward the good – that allows students to form human bonds across religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. We urge the UW System to seize this “teachable moment” by showing the respect due to a people whose faith in God has sustained them through times of immense difficulty. We ask that you celebrate and imitate this “reflex towards the good” and assent to the requested 2021 start date changes.

With prayers and appreciation for your service,

Kim Vercauteren
Executive Director