

May 27, 2021

UW System President Tommy Thompson  
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1220 Linden Drive  
Madison, WI 53706

Regent President Andrew S. Petersen  
Board of Regents  
1860 Van Hise Hall  
1220 Linden Dr.  
Madison, WI 53706

VIA EMAIL

Dear President Thompson, President Petersen and the Board of Regents:

Thank you for your May 18, 2021 memo to UW System Chancellors regarding the current conflict with the start dates of several UW System Institutions and Rosh Hashanah. We appreciate and understand the need to remind Chancellors of current law related to religious accommodation.

The conflict with Rosh Hashanah was entirely preventable and should never have happened. This situation--which has been left unresolved for nearly six months--has highlighted the need for a clear, consistent, and transparent policy dealing with religious diversity on our campuses. Potential conflicts with religious observance should always be taken into account when institutions set their schedules.

Religious holidays fall at different times of the year and change year-to-year depending on the religion (e.g., Ramadan during exams, Rosh Hashanah at the start of the year, Passover at midterms, etc.), causing varying date-specific interruptions to the rhythm of campus life. As a result, religious accommodation by the University is an ongoing responsibility that requires consistent and creative attention.

By starting our Fall 2021 classes on Rosh Hashanah, the UW System and its campuses are setting an exclusionary and unwelcoming tone for Jewish students. Other academic institutions have made changes to their calendars as recently as May 21 to avoid conflicts with the holiday. When announcing their decision to move the first day of classes to September 9, Columbia University leadership wrote:

*“This year, the return to campus carries particular significance and is unique in that we will have many students entering campus for the first time. We are implementing this calendar adjustment from our strong desire that all Columbia students can begin this post-COVID academic year together, both within their entering cohorts and as a University community.”*

We understand that ideally each UW campus should have the ability to resolve their own scheduling issues. However, there are times when an issue must be resolved at the system level. There is a clear

need for a comprehensive UW System policy on religious observance within the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework.

We strongly believe that to truly address these issues, direction must come from the Board of Regents and the President of the System. Therefore, we respectfully ask the Board of Regents to vote during your June 3 and 4, 2021, meeting to:

1. Mandate the six UW campuses (UW-La Crosse, UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Parkside, UW-Stout and UW Superior) that have scheduled the commencement of Fall classes on Rosh Hashanah to move their start dates. As permitted by state law, campuses could move their start date to before the holiday and begin classes on September 2, or they could move their start date to after the holiday and begin classes on September 9.
2. If current law prevents you from mandating a date change, we then ask that you adopt a resolution requesting campuses to move their start dates.
3. Require campuses that scheduled their first day of classes on Rosh Hashanah to provide to you their current detailed communication plan by June 15, 2021. Plans must include at a minimum:
  - a. A recognition of the error and an apology to the campus community.
  - b. Steps being taken in the short and long-term to ensure this will not happen again.
  - c. A strategy to shift the burden of seeking and ensuring religious accommodation from the student to the institution.
  - d. Include at SOAR (Student Orientation and Registration) a session to communicate how accommodation will go beyond the classroom into the fabric of the first days of class.
  - e. Demonstrate the commitment to inclusion and diversity of faith and ethnicity in all communications and gatherings, including in welcome materials, social media, and non-academic activities.
  - f. A plan to inform faculty, staff and students in academic and non-academic units of the expectation to refrain from scheduling work and social gatherings from Monday evening through Wednesday evening.
  - g. Clear expectations for faculty and staff (academic and otherwise) of the need for inclusion and accommodation of students.
4. Direct the Board of Regents' Education Committee to work with internal and external stakeholders to establish a comprehensive, long-term, system-wide policy relating to religious diversity and observance for all religions represented on our campuses. Some of the areas to be considered include:
  - a. A strategy to shift the burden of seeking and ensuring religious accommodation from the student to the institution.
  - b. Adding into all scheduling tools a list of holiday observances.

- c. Identifying members of the administration and staff to serve as leads on religious accommodation.
- d. Include a group of faith leaders in calendar oversight.
- e. Ensure that all training of DEI officers, staff, and liaisons include holiday observance/celebration policy and sensitivity training.
- f. Add an educational tool to the cross-campus HR platform on religious diversity.
- g. Include members of multiple minority religious communities (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, etc.) in affinity groups and DEI programming.

As some of us wrote to you in February, we are simply asking that the UW System require its campuses to follow its own 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."

Going forward, we are asking the UW System campuses to respect all communities represented in our student body with a transparent and inclusive process for setting the academic calendar well in advance to avoid conflicts whenever possible.

We hope that the Board of Regents will begin to address these issues at its June 3 and 4, 2021 meeting. We sincerely believe that the University of Wisconsin System can and should become a leader nationally as we work together to live up to the UW System's own stated goals.

Thank you again for your leadership. We stand ready to assist you in your efforts.

We look forward to your response. Our point of contact is Michael Blumenfeld, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, 608/575-8018 or [mblumenfeld@mblumenfeld.com](mailto:mblumenfeld@mblumenfeld.com).

Sincerely,

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The Crossing Campus Ministry (UW-Madison)

Rev. Karla Schmidt, Campus Minister  
The Crossing Campus Ministry (UW-Madison)

Adam Lehman, President & CEO  
Mark Rotenberg, Vice President, University Initiatives & Legal Affairs  
Hillel International

Greg Sinaiko, Board Chair,  
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Pardeep S. Kaleka, Executive Director  
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Dr. Ibrahim Saeed, President  
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Kai Gardner Mishlove, Director  
Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation

Alan Klugman, Executive Director  
Jewish Federation of Madison

Reverend Cindy Crane, Director  
Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin

Miryam Rosenzweig, President and CEO  
Milwaukee Jewish Federation

Asifa Quraishi-Landes, Professor, UW Law School, Faculty Advisor  
UW Muslim Law Student Association & Middle Eastern Law Students Association

Rev. Erica Liu, Pastor & Director of Campus Ministry  
Pres House (UW-Madison)

Mark Elsdon, Executive Director  
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Ginger Morgan, Director of Candid & Community Initiatives  
Pres House (UW-Madison)

The Rev. Donald M. Fleischman, Chaplain  
Saint Francis House Episcopal Student Center (UW-Madison)

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We Are Many-United Against Hate

Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director  
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Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Executive Director  
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Michael Blumenfeld, Executive Director  
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Cc: Chancellor Rebecca Blank  
Chancellor Debbie Ford  
Chancellor Katherine P. Frank  
Chancellor Joe Gow  
Chancellor Andrew Leavitt  
Chancellor Dr. Renée Wachter