



June 15, 2021

Edmund Manydeeds III  
President, UW System Board of Regents

Tommy Thompson  
President, UW System

Dear Regent President Manydeeds and System President Thompson,

I appreciate the opportunity to share with you and members of the Board of Regents and concerned community members the steps UW-Madison has taken to address the conflict created by the scheduling of the first day of the semester on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. I deeply regret this conflict exists.

We looked first at simply adjusting our calendar. Unfortunately, due to the complexity and inflexibilities in our underlying administrative systems, it is not possible to change start-dates at this point in time. The start date gets set far in advance and it affects all sorts of behind-the-scenes aspects of our work, including student financial aid packages, such as loan promissory note and repayment obligations, and separate federal and state reporting requirements. Fulfilling our regulatory and service obligations requires meticulous, extensive programming to underlying information systems built around the start and end dates of each academic term, as well as programming of downstream systems that depend on this date for management of their processes. It is these highly technical, and integrated systems (and the necessary tables that underlie them) that makes changes in start dates so complex.

With regard to the conflicts this fall, we have moved as many activities as possible. Our fall semester is scheduled to start on Wednesday, September 8. Tuesday, September 7 was going to be a date for Convocation and for departmental events. When these conflicts were raised with us we moved Convocation and departmental outreach and events for incoming students to Friday, September 3, so the first day of Rosh Hashanah has no calendar conflicts. This means we also moved up move-in to the residence halls by two days and added extra programming for freshman who will now be in town longer before school starts.

This spring, Provost Karl Scholz created a Working Group on the Academic Calendar and Accommodations to help ensure that a conflict like the one that we face this fall semester does not happen again. The group includes representatives of the Office of the Provost, the Office of Undergraduate Advising, the University Registrar, the University Committee (the executive body of the Faculty Senate), the Academic Staff Executive Committee, the Division of Diversity, Equity and Educational Achievement, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Office of Academic Planning and Institutional Research. Led by Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning (and Professor) John Zumbrunnen, the working group is pursuing a variety of efforts, including:

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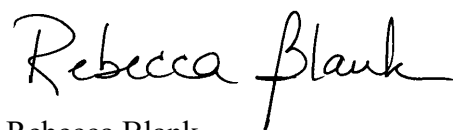
- Reviewing the academic calendar for the next five academic years to gain a full understanding of potential conflicts in order to avoid them in the future, if possible. The committee will consult with experts on campus to ensure reference to an inclusive calendar of religious observances. This committee will also explore best practices for accommodations.
- Enhancing our communication with instructors about the need for accommodations for students who will be observing Rosh Hashanah.
  - Under current practice, our Secretary of the Faculty, in coordination with the Office of the Provost, sends a reminder to all instructors regarding the UW Madison Religious Observances and Accommodations Policy (<https://kb.wisc.edu/lis/page.php?id=21698>).
  - To expand and enhance this practice, the working group has already shaped a message sent on June 1 to all faculty and academic staff drawing attention to the conflict with the fall start date and highlighting ways that instructors can plan ahead to accommodate students.
  - The working group is planning for two additional messages to be sent to instructors in August, as preparations for the fall semester intensify. These messages will encourage faculty to proactively reach out to the students in their courses to inform them of our campus religious observances policy, and to let students know their plans to offer flexibility.
- Enhancing the University's communication with students about the availability of and process for seeking accommodations for religious observances. The working group is coordinating with the Center for the First Year Experience (which administers our Student Orientation, Advising and Registration (SOAR) program for incoming students); Student Affairs communications, and UW-Madison Communications to draw on a variety of channels (including all-student e-mails, our student facing publication *The Weekly*, and University social media accounts) to inform students about the process for seeking accommodations, including steps to take if they find their accommodation needs are not being met.
- Exploring the creation of digital materials aimed at educating the campus community about religious observances, our policy, and the need for accommodating students.

We are also reminding staff, faculty, and other campus community members of our campus policy about religious accommodations, making sure that workplace flexibility is extended to staff and faculty and others who celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

I want to assure you that are very committed to both mitigating the impact of the conflict this fall with the first day of class and the second day of Rosh Hashanah for students, faculty and staff, as well as putting into place a series of steps that will do everything possible to avoid such a conflict in the future.

Please be in touch if you have further questions.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Blank  
Chancellor

Cc: John Karl Scholz, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs  
Charles Hoslet, Vice Chancellor for University Relations  
John Zumbrunnen, Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning