

Designing and Distributing a Religious Accommodation Policy

Overview

Cultivating a welcoming and inclusive campus climate requires institutional leaders to be attentive to major religious holidays observed by their students and to ensure that appropriate policies, educational offerings, and communications are in place. This resource outlines key best practice principles and offers specific examples from U.S. colleges and universities.

Policy Design

Religious Holiday Course Absence Policies

Administrators should proactively support student requests for accommodations for religious holiday observance by adopting and enforcing a policy with clear procedures and by communicating that policy to staff, faculty and students.

Recommendations and Examples:

Create a clear and consistent approach for requesting an absence or other religious accommodation (e.g. an extension on a project) that articulates a process for making up missed work or exams before or after the holiday. The policy should:

1. Affirm the institution's commitment to supporting students' religious identities and practices and their academic success.

Syracuse University

"Syracuse University recognizes the diverse faith traditions represented among its campus community and supports the rights of faculty, staff, and students to observe according to these traditions. All University offices are asked to be sensitive to the needs of faculty, staff, and students who are observing a religious holiday when scheduling meetings and events."

2. Define what is meant by religious accommodation so that students know what is covered within the scope of the institutional policy.

University of Utah

"A Religious Accommodation may include but is not limited to rescheduling or providing a make-up exam, rescheduling a student's in-class presentation, allowing a make-up assignment to substitute for missed class work, changing a course assignment's due date, or excusing an absence from the course."

3. Require that students who miss examinations or assignments are offered a reasonable amount of time to make up the work without penalty.

Michigan State University

"Absences may not be counted as a missed class in any course in which attendance is a measure of academic performance... Reasonable extensions of time must be given, without academic penalty, for missed assignments; students must be allowed to schedule presentations around such absences. Make-up work should be appropriate and not more difficult than the original assignment."

4. Require students to provide reasonable prior notification of a requested accommodation.

[John Carroll University](#)

“Students who will be prevented from attending class or fully participating in class due to observance of a religious holiday or event should discuss their needs with their instructors as early in the semester as is possible. If possible, faculty members are to grant excused absences for these students. However, students should be aware that last-minute requests are usually inappropriate.”

5. Instruct faculty to clearly communicate the institution’s religious accommodation policy on course syllabi.

[University of Virginia](#) (from syllabus template provided by website):

“As your instructor, I am committed to providing a learning environment where all are welcomed and valued. I care about your success and well-being and encourage you to contact me to discuss individual concerns or requests with respect to the course. This includes letting me know if you have a disability-related request for accommodation or an accommodation request for... [religious reasons].”

6. Provide students with clear instructions on how to proceed should a faculty member be unable or unwilling to grant an appropriate accommodation, and indicate who is responsible for resolving disputes between students and faculty.

[University of Michigan](#)

“Students who are absent on days of examinations or class assignments shall be offered an opportunity to make up the work, without penalty, unless it can be demonstrated that a make-up opportunity would interfere unreasonably with the delivery of the course. Should disagreement arise over any aspect of this policy, the parties involved should contact the Department Chair, the Dean of the School, or the Ombudsperson. Final appeals will be resolved by the Provost.”

7. Be shared with students during orientation programs at the start of a semester.

[Michigan State University](#)

“Orientation programs for new students... must inform incoming students about this policy and

urge them to check for conflicts before the deadline for informing their instructors.”

8. Inform faculty that significant assignments or course events must not be scheduled on major religious holidays.

[University of Virginia](#)

“Consult a calendar of religious observances. Review the calendar below and familiarize yourself with the religious holidays that may fall during your class or exam times. To minimize the need for accommodations, we strongly encourage you to consider not scheduling exams on religious holidays, including days on which the student will be fasting.”

9. Avoid limiting the number of calendar days for which students can request accommodation.

[Yale University](#)

“Q: How many classes may a student miss as a religious accommodation?”

A: Religious accommodations are determined on an individual basis and often depend on the circumstances.”

10. Refrain from requiring students to provide documentation or explanations for their requests; students should be trusted to identify their own needs.

[University of California Berkeley](#)

“Reasonable common sense, judgment and the pursuit of mutual goodwill should result in the positive resolution of scheduling conflicts.”

11. Ensure that accommodations are not subject to faculty discretion. If the request aligns with the institution’s policy, students should expect it to be honored regardless of faculty awareness or impressions of that holiday or observance. Faculty may determine how the accommodation is made, but not whether the student receives it. For example, should a student need to miss lab work, faculty members may determine a reasonable and appropriate alternative time and place for that work to be completed.

[University of Buffalo](#)

“An instructor may not unilaterally deny a request for a reasonable religious accommodation without first consulting EDI.”

Managing Scheduling Conflicts

Institutions should avoid scheduling important campus-wide events on major religious holidays observed by student communities. These events may include dormitory move-in or move-out days, orientation, homecoming, alumni and family weekends, campus-wide student fairs, and graduation.

The following best practices can help campuses avoid this type of scheduling conflict:

- 1. Consult with local Jewish professionals or faith leaders** such as a Hillel executive director, campus rabbi/imam/priest, or others in your community to determine which holidays should be avoided.
- 2. Clearly communicate instructions for avoiding conflicts with religious holidays** to campus leadership, staff, departments, academic units and faculty. Frame your communication within the context of your campus values, particularly your commitment to inclusion for all faith communities. See below for a list of major Jewish holidays to avoid whenever possible.
- 3. Acknowledge that some holidays observed by students may not be included in your institution's list of major religious holidays.** Some scheduling conflicts may be inevitable. In these cases, it is best to acknowledge the conflict, offer reasonable accommodations, and communicate those accommodations proactively to students, faculty and staff. CCI recommends that administrators publicly acknowledge the mistake, offer to meet with impacted students to learn more about their needs, and commit publicly to specific action steps that will ensure avoidance of similar mistakes in the future.

Example

[University of Wisconsin - Madison](#)

Chancellor Rebecca M. Blank issued this June 2021 campus-wide communication after the university inadvertently scheduled the first day of classes during Rosh Hashanah:

"This year, unfortunately, the first day of classes is scheduled to occur on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and one of Judaism's holiest holidays. This is an overlap which we should have identified when schedules

were being set. Our process didn't work in this instance and for that I'm deeply sorry...In accord with university policy, I am asking department chairs and supervisors to extend flexibility to instructors and other employees to support their observance of the holiday."

Religious Holiday Calendars

Institutions should provide staff, faculty and students with multi-year, multi-faith religious holiday calendars to help them avoid scheduling conflicts on major religious holidays and to guide faculty in offering their students religious holiday accommodations. Effective religious holiday calendars:

- Include the religious holidays of diverse faith communities
- Specify when holidays begin and end (e.g. morning; sundown)
- Explain the significance of the holiday
- Denote whether holiday observance involves limitations on academic work or other restrictions and provide recommended accommodations
- Are widely publicized and easily accessible to the campus community for the purpose of planning courses, co-curricular activities, and major campus events.

The following are best practices for maximizing the effectiveness of religious holiday calendars:

- **Use multi-year calendars for advance planning** to avoid scheduling major university events on religious holidays. **Communicate about major holidays with your campus community** before they occur.
- **Engage in, and encourage, inclusive actions that foster a welcoming environment and cultural literacy.** For example, campus leaders may send out a greeting in order to acknowledge an important holiday; campus communications might highlight diverse student voices and experiences; dining halls can feature traditional holiday foods; and offices of student or religious affairs may develop programming that celebrates and educates about religious holiday observances.

Example

University of Vermont

The University of Vermont's multi-year interfaith calendar helps staff and faculty avoid scheduling conflicts over multiple years. It includes the dates and significance of religious holidays along with suggested accommodations.

Yom Kippur – Begins at Sundown (Jewish)

Oct. 11 - 12, 2024; Oct. 1 - 2, 2025; Sept. 20 - 21, 2026; Oct. 10 - 11, 2027

Holiday with significant work restriction

Yom Kippur is often considered the holiest day of the year for Jews, and the day is dedicated to atonement and abstinence.

General Practices: During Yom Kippur, Jews fast from before sundown until after sunset, and light a Yahrzeit memorial candle at sundown on the night of Yom Kippur.

Date details: Begins at sundown on the first evening listed and ends the second evening listed.

Recommended Accommodations: Avoid scheduling important academic deadlines, events, or activities on this date and after a day of fasting.

Navaratri (Hindu)

Oct. 2 - 12, 2024; Sept. 22 - Oct. 2, 2025; Oct. 11 - 19, 2026; Sept. 30 - Oct. 8, 2027

Navaratri is one of the greatest Hindu festivals, and celebrates the triumph of good over evil. During this time, Hindus worship Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati.

General Practices: Durga is the mother goddess, and so Hindus try to visit their mothers and other relatives during this time. Some Hindus will pray and fast, and there are are of ten feasts and dances.

Policy Distribution & Training

In each of the areas discussed - course absence policies, major campus event scheduling, and religious holiday calendars:

- A specific campus administrator should be designated as the responsible party to contact for any challenges or conflicts;
- Training should be required as a part of campus employee, faculty, and student leader onboarding so that campus leaders at all levels are familiar with relevant religious holiday policies, procedures, and norms;
- Jewish and other cultural & religious leadership (both student and professional) should be engaged to provide guidance and ensure that policies, procedures, and calendars meet each communities' needs.

Appendix

Major Jewish Holidays to Consider before Scheduling

The Jewish calendar includes seven major holidays where work is forbidden or avoided. Jewish students may take time off for preparation and observance and may therefore request accommodations on these days. They include Rosh Hashanah (two days), Yom Kippur, Sukkot (two days), Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah, Passover (first two and last two days) and Shavuot (two days). Jewish holidays begin the night before and continue through the next day. Some students also avoid work on the Sabbath, which begins each week at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday.

While it may not be possible to avoid scheduling events on all holidays, it is recommended that campuses avoid university-wide programs on the first night and day of Rosh Hashanah, on Yom Kippur and on the first night and day of Passover as these days are observed by the vast majority of American Jews.

[Click here](#) for more information about the Jewish holiday calendar.

Example

[Duke University Student Affairs, Jewish Holidays 2024-2026](#)

About the Hillel Campus Climate Initiative:

CCI is a collaboration between Hillel International, higher education administrators and campus-based Hillel professionals that fosters a positive, affirming campus climate where Jewish students feel comfortable expressing their identity and values, free from antisemitism, harassment, and marginalization. If you have questions or wish to consult with the CCI team on this issue, please contact us at cci@hillel.org.