

UNIVERSITY SENATE
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Introduced by: The Executive Committee of the Senate

November 21, 2005

NO SUSPENSION OF CLASSES FOR RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

IT IS HEREBY PROPOSED THAT THE FOLLOWING BE ADOPTED:

That the University allow absences from classes due to religious observances in accordance with the model below, and that classes not be suspended for religious holidays that are not also federal holidays;

That this shall become effective beginning with the 2007-2008 academic year;

That the academic calendar with classes suspended for major Jewish, Muslim and Christian holidays, as is the case during this academic year, remain in effect through the 2006-2007 academic year.

Rationale

The Executive Committee discussed various options for the calendar at its meeting on November 7, 2005 and determined that the first issue to be decided by the Senate is whether to suspend classes for any religious holidays. A proposal for no suspension of classes for religious holidays was passed by the University Life Council last spring but was not introduced given the recent change in the senior administration. The Executive Committee is introducing the earlier bill from ULC (with the slight change of text pertaining to "federal holidays") to the Senate to focus the discussion on a specific option. **The Executive Committee has not taken a position on the merits of the proposal.** The rationale and supporting materials accompanying the ULC proposal from the spring are provided below.

ULC's Rationale for its Spring 2005 Proposal

The University's Mission Statement reads, in part, "Members of the faculty and staff join with their students, undergraduate and graduate, in defining the University as characterized by these discrete, yet interdependent qualities: First, a commitment to the pursuit and advancement of knowledge, for its own sake and for its practical benefits to society." The primary mission of the University is academic.

The University community is becoming increasingly diverse across religions. The policy to hold classes on religious holidays will show respect for all religions by treating them equally in the academic calendar. (See below for data on religious affiliation.)

The University has entered an era in which greater flexibility in the instructional calendar is needed. Constraints in the instructional calendar increase as the addition of days off for any reason increases, making it difficult to maintain an instructional calendar which meets all legal requirements and supports the mission of the University at Albany. In recent years, classes have often been suspended for from three to five days per academic year for religious holidays. An alternate method for student absences due to religious observances is proposed.

Alternate Model

Students will be required to inform faculty in the first week of class in each semester (*pro rata* for summer sessions) what day or days they will be absent from classes due to religious observances. Faculty will not schedule any major in class examinations or major assignments due for the dates of religious holidays that were traditionally honored through class suspension. If conflict is unavoidable, every student who has a legitimate religious observance must be given an opportunity to make up examinations or assignments. This is in accordance with Section Education 224a of the New York State Education Law.

Since the dates of religious holidays are known well in advance, faculty can plan their courses and course syllabi and students can plan ahead for religious observances. The University can note the dates of major religious observances on the academic calendar and make this information available online.

Comment

The 2001 "American Religious Identification Survey" produced an estimate that the New York State population is 38% Catholic, 5% Jewish, 2% Muslim, 1%

Buddhist, 13% no religion and the rest other religions (see http://gc.cuny.edu/studies/key_findings.htm). In the 2004 *Chronicle of Higher Education's* annual survey of freshmen students, the percentage reporting Roman Catholic and most Protestant affiliations has declined since 1995. While a small percentage of the total freshmen, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist numbers have risen since 1995. The most recent data on the religious identification of UAlbany students is from a 1993 survey. In it the two largest religious groups are Catholic (36.6%) and Jewish (23.6%). Less than 2% of students reported affiliation with the Muslim or Buddhist religions. Our impression is that the religious diversity at UAlbany has increased since that survey.

The University Life Council was charged by the University Senate with reviewing the University's policy on class suspension for religious holidays. ULC members sought feedback from the campus community on the policy and its impact on the University's mission. The feedback was sought in several different ways: a forum, e-mail comment, letters, and discussion by Council members with other constituencies in the campus community. Finally, members of the ULC Ad Hoc Committee on Class Suspension for Religious Observances reviewed policies at other universities.

What emerged is that religion is an integral part of individuals' lives as members of the campus community. Yet, any University must first fulfill its teaching mission. It is in this arena that we believe the additional flexibility this bill provides will allow every religion to be recognized. At the same time, the University can responsibly discharge its legal and pedagogical responsibilities by providing an environment that allows its constituents the greatest flexibility in teaching and learning and in religious observances.

The University Life Council recommends that the University work with student groups, campus ministries and Chapel House staff to develop a plan for annual community celebrations of each of the major religious holidays. These celebrations would be secular, perhaps involving booths in the Campus Center with food, music and information on religious practices. These would educate the campus community about various religious traditions and would show respect and recognition for them.

Implementation

The Registrar's Office should develop and maintain a table of religious holidays that will be available to faculty, students, and administrators on MyUAlbany or elsewhere on the UAlbany web site. Five years worth of religious holidays should be kept at all times.