Resolution on the academic calendar, diversity, and inclusion

WHEREAS establishment of the academic calendar falls within the authority of the faculty (Faculty Policies & Procedures 1.20);

WHEREAS the University of Wisconsin–Madison scheduled the start of Fall 2021 semester instruction on September 8, 2021, during Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest Jewish holidays, which began this year on the evening of September 6 and ended on the evening of September 8;

WHEREAS this scheduling conflict, while unintended, nevertheless sets an exclusionary and unwelcoming tone for Jewish students, staff, and faculty, thereby falling short of the university’s pledge to be a “welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background,” as codified in UW–Madison’s Institutional Statement on Diversity;

WHEREAS the University of Wisconsin Hillel Foundation raised these concerns with the University Committee and Provost Karl Scholz as early as January 2021 and again in March 2021 in a letter to Chancellor Rebecca Blank signed by more than fifty faculty and academic staff;

WHEREAS the George L. Mosse/Laurence A. Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies at UW–Madison raised similar concerns in April 2021 in a statement to the Chancellor;

WHEREAS some peer institutions altered their academic calendars as late as May 21, 2021, to avoid conflicts with the Rosh Hashanah holiday;

WHEREAS the technical and administrative difficulties that reportedly prevented UW–Madison from changing the Fall 2021 start date did not prevent the Faculty Senate from altering the Spring 2021 academic calendar;

WHEREAS instead of changing the start date for Fall 2021 semester instruction at UW-Madison, the university administration opted to move Convocation and allow students to move into residence halls two days earlier and in collaboration with the University Committee form a Working Group on the Academic Calendar and Accommodations to review the academic calendar and prevent future conflicts, and remind students and instructors about the university’s already existing religious accommodation policy.

WHEREAS these steps, though welcome and commendable, fall short of adequately resolving the problem;

WHEREAS the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, joined by leaders of The Crossing Campus Ministry (UW–Madison), Hillel International, UW Hillel Foundation, Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, Islamic Community of Madison Area, Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, Jewish Federation of Madison, Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, Milwaukee Jewish Federation, UW Muslim Law Student Association & Middle Eastern Law Students Association, Pres House (UW–Madison), Saint Francis House Episcopal Student Center (UW–Madison), We Are Many–United Against Hate, Wisconsin
Catholic Conference, Wisconsin Council of Churches, Wisconsin Council of Rabbis, and Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice, raised concerns about the conflict of the Fall 2021 start date with Rosh Hashanah at UW–Madison and five other UW System campuses in a letter dated May 27, 2021, to UW System President Tommy Thompson and (then) Regent President Andrew S. Petersen;

WHEREAS the UW System and Board of Regents may take action of their own if UW–Madison and other campuses fail to address this issue sufficiently;

RESOLVED, That the Faculty Senate commends Chancellor Rebecca Blank for publicly apologizing on July 20, 2021, for the scheduling conflict with Rosh Hashanah, taking action to mitigate the impact of the conflict, and pledging to prevent similar conflicts and their attendant harms in the future;

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the UW–Madison Faculty Senate deeply regrets and apologizes for its part in the harm caused to students, staff, and faculty by scheduling the start of Fall 2021 semester instruction during the Rosh Hashanah holiday, and it commits to preventing similar harms by avoiding future conflicts with major holidays and observances of the Jewish community and other communities on campus;

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Faculty Senate reminds all instructors of their obligation under UWS 22 to reasonably accommodate students’ sincerely held religious beliefs with respect to academic requirements, with the understanding that students may need to request accommodation this year for the Rosh Hashanah holiday ex post facto;

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Faculty Senate urges the university’s Division of Diversity, Equity, and Educational Achievement and the Office of the Provost to take an active part in the prevention of future scheduling conflicts and their attendant harms, in part by developing appropriate communications, educational materials, and oversight comparable to what has been implemented in peer institutions;

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Faculty Senate urges the University Committee and the Secretary of the Faculty to be mindful of major religious and other world holidays in future planning of the academic calendar and, to this end, to solicit as necessary the help of advisors from the faculty or external partners; to work with university administrators to make UW–Madison a national leader in ethno-religious diversity; and to better integrate ethno-religious diversity into planning and goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion and human resources training and education.