

Accommodations During Religious Holidays: A Guide for University Faculty and Staff

Introduction: It is part of the responsibility of educational institutions to create an inclusive and supportive learning, working, and living environment for all, regardless of religious beliefs and practices. One important aspect of inclusivity is accommodating community members whose most important celebrations are not civic holidays, or who may be fasting for religious reasons. This resource provides guidance on how to provide support and accommodation during such times.

Understanding Religious Fasting: Fasting (temporarily abstaining from something, such as food and water) is a practice observed across many traditions, including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Fasts often have specific rules and can vary in duration. Some common fasting periods include Ramadan (Islam), Yom Kippur (Judaism), and Lent (some forms of Christianity).

Key Considerations:

1. Awareness:

- Familiarize yourself with the major religious holidays and fasting periods that may affect others. Keep in mind that these dates may change each year based on lunar or religious calendars.

2. Flexibility when Planning Events, Meetings, Classes, and Exams:

- Incorporate major holidays and times of fasting into your planning. Try not to schedule important events on, for example, Yom Kippur or Eid al-Fitr.
- Be flexible with assignment deadlines, exams, and class schedules during religious holidays and fasts. Consider offering alternative assignment options or makeup opportunities for affected students.

3. Communication:

- Encourage open communication between you and your students / team members. Create a safe space for them to discuss their needs and potential accommodations. Instructors, consider placing accommodation language in syllabi, such as: "I have tried to arrange exams and assignments so as not to fall during major religious holidays. Please reach out if there is a conflict or if you need accommodations for religious fasting."
- Respect privacy and only discuss an individual's religious needs if they are comfortable sharing this information.

4. Providing Resources:

- Be aware of and share resources such as campus prayer rooms, chaplaincy services, or wellbeing services that can support students during religious holidays.

5. Inclusivity:

- In language around holidays, be aware that there are multiple traditions and practices on campus.

Holiday Guide:

Not every holiday is equal in importance. Just as the feast day of John the Baptist is not on the level of Easter, Hannukah is not on the level of Passover. Here are some of the more important religious holidays and fasting periods not reflected in the civic calendar:

1. **Ramadan (Islam):**

- Dates vary each year based on the Islamic lunar calendar.
- Typically lasts about a month.
- Many Muslims fast from food and water from dawn (Suhur) until sunset (Iftar) and are up in the middle of the night for prayers.

2. **Eid al-Fitr (Islam):**

- Celebrated at the end of Ramadan.
- Usually a 1-3 day festival, depending on cultural traditions.
- A time for communal prayers, feasting, and giving to charity (Zakat al-Fitr).

3. **Yom Kippur (Judaism):**

- Observed on the 10th day of the Jewish month of Tishrei.
- A 25-hour fast from sunset to sunset, focusing on atonement and repentance.

4. **Rosh Hashanah (Judaism):**

- The Jewish New Year, observed on the 1st and 2nd days of Tishrei.
- A festive time with prayer, reflection, and the sounding of the shofar.

5. **Passover (Judaism):**

- a week-long holiday beginning on the 15th day of Nisan, the first two nights of which are often important family meals/gatherings
- many Jewish families abstain from leaven (yeast) and bread, and even from dishes that have come into contact with it.

6. **Lent (Christianity):**

- Observed by many Christian denominations, starting on Ash Wednesday and lasting for 40 days (excluding Sundays).
- A period of reflection, varying degrees of fasting, and penance leading up to Easter.

7. **Good Friday (Christianity):**

- Observed on the Friday preceding Easter Sunday.

- Commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

8. Diwali (Hinduism):

- A Hindu festival of lights celebrated over five days.
- A time of feasting, prayer, and lighting lamps and candles.

9. Bodhi Day (Buddhism):

- Celebrated on December 8th in some Buddhist traditions.
- Commemorates the day Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

10. Vaisakhi (Sikhism):

- Sikh New Year, celebrated in March or April (Nanakshahi calendar).
- A time for prayer, reflection, and community gatherings.

11. Shabbat (weekly; various):

- More than one community (primarily Judaism, but also some Christians such as Seventh Day Adventists) observes a Sabbath from Friday at sundown to Saturday at Sundown, during which they must rest. Scheduling a class, meeting, or exam during this time may result in excluding (or needing to make alternative arrangements for) Sabbath-observant individuals.

12. Lunar New Year (various):

- often called “Chinese New Year,” this is a misnomer. Many Asian countries celebrate the New Year according to the lunar calendar (which falls in January or February)

These are just a few examples, and there are many more religious holidays and fasting periods observed by various faith traditions. It's essential for faculty and managers to be aware of these dates and to work with students and employees to ensure that they can observe their religious practices while continuing their academic pursuits and workplace duties.

Sample Email Template: Subject: Important Information Regarding Religious Accommodations

Dear [Class Name] Students,

I hope this message finds you well. I want to take a moment to acknowledge that some of you may be observing religious holidays in the coming months that involve fasting or other religious practices. It is important to me that you feel supported during this time.

If you anticipate any challenges related to fasting or religious observance during the semester, please don't hesitate to reach out to me or to Cathy MacDonald, AVP Academic Affairs. I am

committed to working with each of you to ensure that your religious needs are accommodated in a way that allows you to fully engage in the course.

I respect your privacy and will handle any discussions or accommodations related to religious observance with the utmost sensitivity and confidentiality. Please let me know how I can assist you during this time.

Additionally, if you are not already aware, our university offers resources such as prayer rooms, counselling services, and chaplaincy support. Please feel free to utilize these resources as needed.

Thank you for your understanding, and I look forward to working with all of you to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Sincerely, [Your Name]

By demonstrating awareness, flexibility, and open communication, university faculty and managers can play a vital role in ensuring that students and employees feel supported and accommodated during religious holidays. This not only helps students succeed academically but also fosters an inclusive and respectful campus community overall.