

Religious Accommodation Policy

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the reason for this policy?

A: The University is committed to providing welcoming and inclusive learning and workplace environments. As part of this commitment, the University will make good faith efforts to provide reasonable religious accommodations to faculty, staff and students whose sincerely held religious practices or beliefs conflict with a University policy, procedure, or other academic or employment requirement, unless such an accommodation would create an undue hardship.

Q: What is a religious accommodation?

A: A reasonable change in the work or academic environment that enables a student or employee to practice or otherwise observe a sincerely held religious practice or belief without undue hardship on the University.

Q: What is undue hardship?

A: The determination of undue hardship is dependent on the facts of each individual situation, and will be made on a case-by-case basis. An undue hardship is more than a minimal burden on the operation of the University. For example, an accommodation may be considered an undue hardship if it would interfere with the safe or efficient operation of the workplace or learning environment and/or would result in the inability of an employee to perform an essential function of the position or a student to fulfill the academic requirements of the course of study.

Faculty are not required to waive or alter the fundamental academic requirements of a course or program. For example, an accommodation request may pose an undue hardship (and be denied) in a case where a student is unable to meet the academic requirements of the course of study due to absences. In those cases, the Instructor should seek additional guidance from their Department Head, who will consult with the Dean and/or Provost's Office where necessary.

Q: What factors are considered in determining whether a requested accommodation causes an undue hardship?

A: Factors considered in determining religious accommodations may include but are not limited to the business needs of the University; academic requirements of a course or program; considerations of cost, safety, efficiency; and the needs and rights of other students and/or employees. An accommodation may be considered an undue hardship if it would interfere with the safe or efficient operation of the workplace or learning environment and/or would result in the inability of an employee to perform an essential function of the position or a student to fulfill the academic requirements of the course of study. The University will not be required to violate a seniority system; cause a lack of necessary staffing; jeopardize security or health; or expend more than a minimal

amount of resources. The determination of undue hardship is dependent on the facts of each individual situation, and will be made on a case-by-case basis.

Q: What are some examples of religious accommodations?

A: A religious accommodation may include, but is not limited to: time for prayer during a work day; the ability to attend religious events or observe a religious holiday; or any necessary modification to University policy, procedure or other requirement for a student's or employee's (or prospective employee's) religious beliefs, observance or practice; provided such accommodation is reasonable and does not cause undue hardship.

Consistent with Connecticut General Statute Section 10a-50, any student who is unable to attend classes on a particular day or days or at a particular time of day because of the tenets of a sincerely held religious practice or belief may be excused from any academic activities on such particular day or days or at such particular time of day.

Employees may be required to use accrued leave (vacation, personal) or leave without pay as part of the religious accommodation.

Q: How may an individual request a religious accommodation?

A: A student who wishes to request a religious accommodation should make the request directly to their instructor with as much advance notice as possible. Students anticipating an absence or missed coursework due to a sincerely held religious practice or belief should use best efforts to inform their instructor no later than the third week of class or one week before the absence if a conflict occurs during the first three weeks of class.

An employee who wishes to request a religious accommodation should make the request directly to their supervisor with as much advance notice as possible.

Advanced notice is strongly recommended in order to allow the instructor or supervisor time to implement reasonable accommodations that do not interfere with the safe or efficient operation of the workplace or learning environment or otherwise result in undue hardship.

Q: What are some ways to accommodate a student's need to miss class for religious reasons?

A: Religious accommodations are determined on an individual basis and often depend on the circumstances. They might include, but are not limited to, rescheduling an exam or giving the student a make-up exam, allowing an individual or group presentation to be made on a different date, letting a student attend a different discussion section for the same class that week, adjusting a due date, or assigning the student appropriate make-up work that is equivalent and intrinsically no more difficult than the original exam or assignment.

Students who are excused from attending classes or exams on certain dates on religious grounds cannot be penalized for failing to attend class or take exams on the days for which they are excused. The instructor may, however, appropriately respond if the student fails to satisfactorily complete any alternative assignment or examination.

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. Being absent from class or other educational responsibilities does not excuse students from keeping up with any information shared or expectations set during the missed class(es). Students are responsible for obtaining the materials and information provided during any class(es) missed. A student who requires a religious accommodation should make the request directly to their instructor with as much advance notice as possible, and work with the instructor to determine a schedule for making up missed work.

Q: Does an individual need to provide proof of a sincerely held religious belief?

A: Generally, no.

If there are concerns about the requested accommodation in the classroom or academic setting, the instructor should consult their department head (or dean in non-departmentalized schools) for assistance and determination of whether a reasonable accommodation can be provided. If an agreement cannot be reached after consulting with the department head (or dean in non-departmentalized schools), the department head will advise the dean and refer the matter to the provost or designee, who will make the final determination following consultation with the Office of the General Counsel.

Supervisors with questions about employee accommodation requests should contact the Department of Human Resources for further support.

In some cases, the University may inquire into the facts and circumstances of the individual's claim that the belief or practice at issue is religious and sincerely held and gives rise to the need for the accommodation. In making this inquiry, the University may seek documentation or other authority regarding a religious practice or belief including discussing the nature of an individual's religious belief(s), practice(s) and accommodations with the individual's spiritual leader (if applicable) or religious scholars to address a request for an accommodation.

Q: Do all religious accommodation requests have to be granted?

A: Accommodation requests are determined on an individual basis and may be denied if they pose an undue hardship. An accommodation request may be considered an undue hardship if it would interfere with the safe or efficient operation of the workplace or learning environment and/or would result in the inability of an employee to perform an essential function of the position or a student to fulfill the academic requirements of the course of study. Alternative accommodations may be explored that enable a student or employee to practice or otherwise observe a sincerely held religious practice or belief.

Q: What if the religious accommodation request appears to cause an undue hardship?

A: The determination of undue hardship is dependent on the facts of each individual situation, and will be made on a case-by-case basis. In the case of a student religious accommodation request, the instructor should consult their department head (or dean in non-departmentalized schools) for assistance and determination of whether a reasonable accommodation can be provided. If an agreement cannot be

reached after consulting with the department head (or dean in non-departmentalized schools), the department head will advise the dean and refer the matter to the provost or designee, who will make the final determination following consultation with the Office of the General Counsel.

In the case of an employee request, if the supervisor determines that the request may pose an undue hardship for the department or if the supervisor otherwise has questions or concerns about the accommodation request, the supervisor should contact the Department of Human Resources for further assistance.

Q: What if an individual did not request a religious accommodation in advance?

A: Individuals seeking a religious accommodation should use best efforts to inform their instructor or supervisor in advance. Advance notice provides an opportunity for the instructor to work with the student and ensure the learning objectives of the course are maintained and, for employees, for the supervisor to maintain business operations during an employee's absence. A request not made in advance may constitute an undue hardship in the academic and employment settings.

Q: What if I believe a course or job requirement conflicts with my religious practices or beliefs?

A: The University will make good faith efforts to provide reasonable religious accommodations to faculty, staff and students whose sincerely held religious practices or beliefs conflict with a University policy, procedure, or other academic or employment requirement.

In a case where a student believes a course or program in its entirety conflicts with their religious practices or beliefs, the student should consult with the course instructor or head of the program to assess whether the student's religious practices or beliefs can be accommodated.

An employee who believes the requirements of their job conflicts with their religious practices or beliefs should consult with their supervisor to determine if a religious accommodation may be made.

Accommodation requests are determined on an individual basis and may be denied if they pose an undue hardship (more than a minimal burden) to the University.

Q: Can a faculty member or course instructor cancel class in order to observe a religious holiday?

A: A course instructor whose religious accommodation will result in missing a scheduled class should make alternative arrangements at least three weeks in advance to either have their class covered by another instructor or plan an activity in advance that would not require the instructor to be present. In the case where a course instructor is unable to make alternative arrangements, the course instructor should discuss the situation with their department head or dean in non-departmentalized schools.

Q: Can an employee display religious symbols, text, decorations, or other religious materials in their workplace? What about holiday decorations?

A: Generally, an employee may display religious symbols, text, decorations, or materials in their work areas as long as they do not create a safety hazard or impose on the rights of others.

As a public institution, departments should ensure there is no appearance of departmental, University or state endorsement of any particular religious beliefs. Accordingly, an employee whose workspace is in public-facing areas of the University (such as a receptionist, for example) may be more restricted in what religious symbols, text, decoration or materials may be able to be displayed in such work areas.

Generally, the presence of holiday decorations will not be considered to cause an appearance of departmental, University or state endorsement of particular religious beliefs, however, managers should be mindful of the importance of avoiding such appearance.

Q: Can a student or employee pray openly and use religious greetings in the classroom or workplace? What about proselytizing?

A: A student or employee may pray openly and use religious greetings as long as these actions do not impose on the rights of others, require others to participate in the religious prayer or activity, cause disruption, and/or interfere with the student or employee's academic or workplace duties. Furthermore, any religious expression should not give the appearance of departmental, University or state endorsement of any particular religious beliefs.

Proselytizing should not be conducted on academic or workplace settings. Such settings are not appropriate for employees and/or students to impose their religious views on others.

Q: Can students and employees conduct religious study groups on University property, such as in a classroom or conference room?

A: Yes, as long as they follow the established procedures for engaging in extracurricular groups, including room reservations and space usage, as all other such student or employee groups. For employees, such study should occur on break or non-work time.

Q: Can meetings or events include a public prayer or invocation?

A: In general, meetings or events may include an opportunity for reflection, such as a moment of silence or invocation that attendees could individually choose to use as a time for prayer. As a public institution, meeting or event organizers should ensure there is no appearance of departmental, University or state endorsement of any particular religious beliefs.

Q: What office do I contact with questions or concerns?

A: An employee with concerns is encouraged to contact their supervisor and/or the Department of Human Resources.

Students with concerns are encouraged to discuss the matter with their course instructor or department head. Students may also contact the Dean of Students Office for additional assistance.

Any individual with questions or concerns may also contact the Office of Institutional Equity at equity@uconn.edu or (860) 486-2943 or refer to <http://equity.uconn.edu/> for further information.