

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
MINUTES OF THE FACULTY SENATE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING MAY 28, 2021
ELECTRONIC MEETING 10:00am-12:00pm

Present: Lisa Billingham, Melissa Broeckelman-Post (Chair), Richard Craig, Provost Mark Ginsberg, SVP Carol Kissal, Tim Leslie, Solon Simmons, Suzanne Slayden, Julie Zobel (Assistant VP – Safety, Emergency and Enterprise Risk Management).

I. Approval of Minutes: The minutes of March 26 and April 12, 2021 will be coming soon.

II. Announcement

- Summer exec meetings:
 - May 28, 10am-12pm
 - June 9, 1pm-3pm
 - July 8: 2-4pm
 - July 22: 2-4pm
- Senior Vice President Kissal:
 - Provided update on Master Plan.
 - All public universities in Virginia are planning on making a unified request for additional funds allocation from American Recovery Plan.
 - Arlington expansion plan is currently in negotiation stages and will be presented to BOV in July.
 - Updated 6-year plan to be submitted to the Commonwealth includes many of the strategic initiatives and resource requirements.

Discussion:

- Provided examples of how Mason can take advantage of Tier III status including cost savings from managing own building permits, issuing own debt, and establish university's own employee classification apart from state classification.
- There was discussion regarding the upcoming raises including merit raise. Senators communicated the inconsistency in messaging, method/frequency of faculty evaluations, and methodologies for determining the raises.
 - Provost Ginsberg shared that 1% is to be used for variety of purposes (not just merit). In Fall 2021, University is looking to add additional 2% primarily for merit.
- Provost Ginsberg:

- Mason's policy regarding vaccination requirements is in line with other public universities in Virginia.
- Summer 2021 enrollments are significantly below the record enrollments in Summer 2020 but higher than Summer 2019.
- Fall 2021 registration: Dorms are also full. All academic units are offering students choice of: face to face, hybrid, and virtual instruction. All online/virtual offerings are fully enrolled but not all face-to-face offerings are. Most students are registering for courses using combination of modalities.
- BOV retreat in July will include Faculty and Staff Senate leadership in conversations around Faculty Success Initiative.
- Plan for involving Faculty in Fall 2021 to examine the issue of retention.
- Shared that starting Fall 2021, every incoming student will have a success coach assigned. The coaching would be differentiated from advising.
- Shared update on the progress made by group on studying feasibility of the joint resolution for dependent tuition benefits.

III. Progress reports, business, and agenda items from Senate Standing Committees

A. Academic Policies – Suzanne Slayden

Senator Slayden invited discussion on the proposal for religious accommodation for inclusion in Academic Policies in the catalog.

Discussion:

- Provost Ginsberg expressed concern about policies becoming overly bureaucratic.
- There was discussion on: how eligible religious holidays will be identified, how such accommodations would be requested and granted, and issues that would create obstacles to agreement from all faculty.
- Senators relayed different examples of issues for referral to AP committee for consideration.

B. Budget and Resources – Tim Leslie –

No report.

C. Faculty Matters – Solon Simmons

No report.

D. Nominations – Richard Craig

- Awaiting results of the Senator elections.
- Another call for nominations will be sent out in late July/early August.

E. Organization and Operations – Lisa Billingham

- Provided updates on the Ombudsperson hiring..

IV. Other Committees/Faculty Representatives

V. New Business, Updates, and Discussion

- Vaccine and safety updates: *Assistant Vice President Julie Zobel, Safety, Emergency and Enterprise Risk Management*
 - Provided updates on plan for return to campus.
 - Early disclosures from COVID health check indicate close to 60-70% vaccination rate.
 - Shared different initiatives to encourage and increase vaccination rate.

Discussion:

- Senator inquired about plan to enforce disclosure of vaccination status.
 - Students are required to provide vaccination documentation to avoid registration hold. The process for this is well established.
 - For faculty and staff, HR is taking the lead on this. Requested faculty input on how to improve the reporting. Senators provided different examples of positive reinforcement including lottery and other reward mechanisms.
- Proposals around religious observances from ([Attachment A](#)) – see *Academic Policies*.
- Faculty Success Initiative—plans to implement revised charge ([Attachment B](#))

Chair Broeckelman-Post opened the discussion noting that the *Faculty Success Initiative* has been used to convey two different things: one is the Faculty Success Initiative that Senators Simmons, Davis and Craig have been working on this past year. The President and Provost are using that same language to have a conversation around how to build the resources to support faculty and staff.

- Senators discussed their views on the matter including similar other initiatives such as QEP, and ARIE.
- There was extensive discussion on defining “success” and aligning it with university needs for its success.
- Senators cited different examples of diverse roles in which faculty serve and contribute to the university’s mission.
- Senator Broeckelman-Post proposed modifying the charge for term-faculty motion ([Appendix C](#)) to address broader questions of faculty success?

VI. On our radar for future meetings

- Reviewing Senate bylaws for identifying possible revisions to the standing rules.
- Processes for managing information requests.

Respectfully submitted,
Kumar Mehta
Secretary

Attachment A

Suggestions brought forward from conversation with Na'ama Gold and Sarah Freedman (Mason Hillel) and Susan Harris (CDE):

1. Develop suggested syllabus language (see attachments below)
2. Faculty development on inclusivity of faith as part of identity and how to accommodate students for high holidays in their faith
3. Include more information about what religious observances for high holidays entail and offer suggestions for accommodations on the campus religious (<https://ulife.gmu.edu/religious-holiday-calendar/>)
4. Include high holidays on academic calendar to help faculty and supervisors be mindful of high holidays when scheduling exams, major assignments, events, etc.

POLICY PROPOSAL:

Religious Diversity and Inclusivity Initiative

Summary

Recent student-led research indicates George Mason University lacks an official Religious Observance Policy. In coordination with the university's Senate Faculty and the Campus Ministry Association, Hillel student board member Sarah Freedman and the current Hillel Executive Director, Na'ama Gold, present the following policy proposal.

Implementing Diverse Religious Observance Accommodations

All Religious Observance Accommodations listed in this policy proposal are derivative of pre-existing religious observance policies at other universities.

- "Instructors should, on the syllabus, notify students of the religious observances policy and of the dates of major papers, exams, and projects."
- "Students should use the appropriate form to request a scheduling accommodation for religious observances, doing so within the first two weeks of the course."
- "Instructors should make a reasonable scheduling accommodation when a student must miss an exam or other academic exercise because of a required religious observance."
- "With timely notice, students must be allowed to make up the work that was missed."
- "Absence for a religious observance does not count toward the number of absences an instructor might allow in a class."¹
- "The University recognizes that there are several religious holidays that affect large numbers of University community members, including Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the first two days of Passover, [Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha] and Good Friday. In consideration of their significance for many students, no examinations may be given and no assigned work may be required on these days. If an examination is given on the first class day after one of these holidays, it must not cover material introduced in class on that holiday."
- "... Jewish holidays begin at sundown on the evening before the published date of the holiday. Late afternoon exams should be avoided on these days. Also, no examinations may be held on Saturdays or Sundays in the undergraduate schools unless they are also available on other days."²

¹ "Supporting Religious Observances," Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (Indiana University Bloomington), accessed March 16, 2021, <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/accommodating-religious-observances/index.html>.

² "Policy on Secular and Religious Holidays," Policy on Secular and Religious Holidays < University of Pennsylvania (University of Pennsylvania, August 29, 2017), <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/secular-religious-holidays/>.

Recommendations and next steps for the university

- Offer a fillable online form for students to access and submit (via email) to the Office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics.
 - Students must C'C their instructors on the email containing the form submission.
 - The form should be posted on either:
 - (1) the same webpage containing George Mason University's Religious Observance calendar, or
 - (2) on the webpage for the Office of Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics
- Require all syllabi to include the Religious Observance Policy in the same manner they include Disability services and accommodations.
 - For online versions of syllabi, require a hyperlink to the university's Religious Observance calendar for students to access.
- Circulate the new policy information, along with a hyperlink to the Religious Observance calendar, via George Mason University's official social media platforms and emails to both students and faculty.

INCLUSIVITY IN DIVERSITY: ACCOMMODATING JEWISH OBSERVANCES BY VALUING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

How can George Mason University use existing religious observance policies as guidelines to accommodate the religious diversity of its Jewish student body?



White Paper

Written by: Sarah Freedman

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Executive Summary

I present the white paper's objective statement and relate it to George Mason University's value of diversity. From there, I present the findings of the university's *College Factual* diversity score and its national ranking. These findings are cross-referenced with *Forward College Guide's* "Best Colleges for Jewish Students."

Next, I address three concerns of the university and present existing precedents that practice an inclusive approach to religious diversity. Following that, I present the risks that coincide with a lack of religious diversity at college institutions. The final component of my paper proposes solutions on how the university can work to accommodate the diverse religious needs of its Jewish students.

Objective Statement

The objective of this paper is to encourage the faculty senate to expand George Mason University's value of diversity to include religious diversity accommodations by using both its *Religious Holiday Calendar* and religious observance policies of other institutions as its guidelines. The accompanying text of the university's *Religious Holiday Calendar* reads:

"University Life provides this information to support your scheduling so that you are aware of the major upcoming religious holidays that Mason students may recognize."

The language used suggests that the calendar is intended to be a tool used by faculty (the "you" is distinct from "Mason students") for the benefit of their students.

Introduction

George Mason University is an exceptional institution that values diversity. There's even a link on the university's homepage (under "About Mason") where visitors can learn more about Diversity at Mason. From there, the "Diverse Community" subsection brings visitors to a page that proudly invites applicants to, "Come as You Are; You'll Fit Right In."

Even so, it's hard for many religious minority students to come as they are and fit in when their needs aren't being sufficiently met. I'm approaching this topic as an active Jewish student leader and advocate on campus. For the purpose of this paper, I'm focusing on the religious observance needs of George Mason University's Jewish student body.

Diversity: Quantitative vs. Qualitative

Diversity represented by numbers is important to both students and the university as a whole. *College Factual's* data indicates that George Mason University's ethnic diversity is ranked at 93%. This is roughly 47% higher than the national average. In the university's overall diversity score, George Mason University is 89%, which is 28% higher than the national average.

College Factual's findings: Quantity

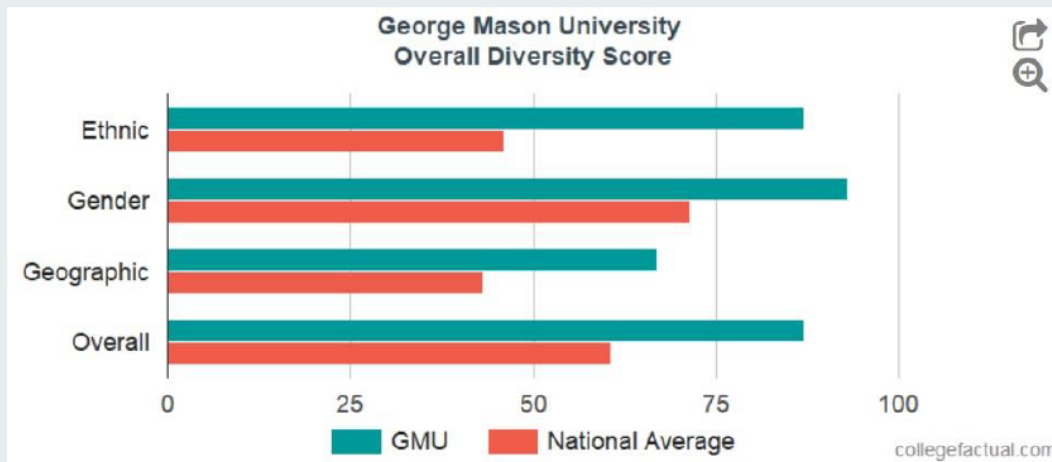


Figure 1: GMU Overall Diversity Rank¹

However, diversity is more than the quantity of students from different backgrounds. *College Factual* measures diversity along gender, ethnicity, race, age, and geography. There is no public data for religious diversity at George Mason University.

An easy way to collect data on an institution's religious diversity is looking at the religious accommodations provided by that institution. George Mason University does not currently have a policy in place for students needing religious accommodations. As a result, Jewish students are often forced to choose between their religious observances, such as Shabbat, and taking an exam.

¹ "How Diverse Is George Mason University?" GMU Population Stats. College Factual. Accessed March 16, 2021. <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/george-mason-university/student-life/diversity/?fbclid=IwAR3RS78it7qM8PUZgJYub95ItMC68-lySnbB4VER1YhI8LQH5tDvIX1JhUM>.

Forward College Guide's findings: Quality

Forward College Guide annually ranks the best colleges for Jewish students by putting together a list of 200+ colleges. The data takes factors such as safety, Jewish community, kosher dining options, and religious accommodations into account.²

By considering these factors, *Forward College Guide* publishes the list to promote colleges that actively include and accommodate Jewish students. This list effectively measures the quality of Jewish students' experiences on college campuses throughout the country.

According to *Forward's* recent list, Indiana University Bloomington ranks #63. This is the same university that George Mason University borrows its *Religious Holiday Calendar* from. Out of the 215 universities on this list, George Mason University is absent.

Comparing *College Factual's* data to *Forward College Guide's* data, it suggests that George Mason University's diversity is quantity based opposed to quality based. Quantity is important, however, quantity is not indicative of inclusivity. A quality based diversity would solve this issue by creating standards that actively include religious diversity initiatives. Ideally starting with religious observance accommodations.

University Concerns

Given George Mason University's status as a public institution, I know there are concerns from the administration about how to legally implement religious accommodations for the Jewish student body and faculty on campus. In the next section, the white paper addresses the following three concerns of the institution:

- Public university limitations
- Time off from school
- Separation of Church and State

² Adkins, Laura E. By The Numbers: The Forward's College Guide Formula, Explained. *The Forward College Guide*, August 8, 2018. <https://forward.com/life/377875/by-the-numbers-the-forwards-college-guide-formula-explained/>.

Precedents of Jewish Religious Diversity Accommodations

The faculty senate is concerned about the limitations of a public university's ability to accommodate religious observances. This may not be an area for concern because the Jewish student body of George Mason University requests accommodations that exist at other public research universities and other public school systems.

No religious diversity accommodations requested in this paper violate Separation of Church and State or ask for extra time off from the university's academic calendar.

Indiana University Bloomington Religious Observance Policy³

- "Instructors should, on the syllabus, notify students of the religious observances policy and of the dates of major papers, exams, and projects."
- "Students should use the appropriate form to request a scheduling accommodation for religious observances, doing so within the first two weeks of the course."
- "Instructors should make a reasonable scheduling accommodation when a student must miss an exam or other academic exercise because of a required religious observance."
- "With timely notice, students must be allowed to make up the work that was missed."
- "Absence for a religious observance does not count toward the number of absences an instructor might allow in a class."

None of these religious observance accommodations violates Separation of Church and State or requires time off from the academic calendar. Having a clear set of religious observance policies promotes religious diversity by addressing the needs of its religious student body.

These guidelines provide specific expectations of both faculty and students and allow for Jewish students to be able to observe Shabbat.

³ "Supporting Religious Observances," Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (Indiana University Bloomington), accessed March 16, 2021, <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/accommodating-religious-observances/index.html>.

UMass Amherst Religious Observance Policy⁴

The University of Massachusetts Amherst provides several online resources for both faculty and students pertaining to religious observance accommodations. It ranks #85 out of 215 in *Forward College Guide's* recent rankings. In fact, this public university maintains a webpage titled "About Jewish Holidays" listing the major Jewish holidays and observances with brief definitions.

UMass's inclusion of Shabbat is significant for religious observance accommodations:

"The Jewish Sabbath—*Shabbat* in Hebrew... —is observed every week beginning at sunset on Friday evening and ending after dark on Saturday evening... Consequently, **Friday evening or Saturday classes or exams will generally pose a conflict for Orthodox Jewish students.**"

This resource exists in order for faculty to familiarize themselves with the different religious backgrounds of their students. This is an important tool for faculty to have when working with students from diverse backgrounds (their website includes equivalent resources for other religions too), especially if that university values diversity.

Risks of Lacking Religious Diversity Accommodations

Religious diversity on campus is not only essential for Jewish students to prosper but necessary for the collective student body to succeed in the diverse world outside of classrooms. A study published in 2016 called "Engaging Religious Diversity"⁵ asserts there are serious risks to not having adequate religious diversity on campus, including but not limited to:

- Not adequately meeting student needs
- Failing to prepare students for lives in a religiously diverse world
- Ongoing conflicts around religious identity in our campus communities
- Missing educational opportunities for our students around religion

⁴ "Religious and Spiritual Life: About the Jewish Holidays," UMass Amherst, accessed March 16, 2021, https://www.umass.edu/orsl/about-jewish-holidays?fbclid=IwAR2upyhvg6o7kGWOGwHFRHZEuAw4fku7_QTImv_v6lO0bjgxa-orjXGCSyU.

⁵ Eboo Patel and Mary Ellen Giess (American College Personnel Association and Wiley Periodicals, Inc., February 2016), 10-14.

Proposed Solution: Two Parts

By following the religious observance precedents established by other public universities, George Mason University's senate faculty can work with the Jewish staff, student leaders, and organizations on campus to craft an innovative solution to the lack of religious diversity accommodations on campus.

1. Model a Religious Observance policy after both Indiana University Bloomington and UMass:

- Create a distinct Religious Observance Policy at George Mason University that follows the same guidelines of Indiana University Bloomington.
- Make this policy accessible to faculty and students both on a university web page and require it to be included in syllabi, like the honor code.
- Provide a fillable religious observance form (on the web page suggested above) online for students and faculty to submit to their relevant departments for religious diversity accommodations.
- Provide a similar "About Jewish Holidays" webpage that UMass follows to accompany the Religious Observance Calendar George Mason University currently uses (borrowed from Indiana University Bloomington).

2. Don't hold exams or major events on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah:

- The recent decision of Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) to adopt an academic calendar overlooking the needs of religious minorities stands as an outlier in the decisions cast by the majority of northern Virginia counties.⁶
- The Jewish community at George Mason University is kindly requesting that the faculty senate stand with the majority of northern Virginia counties by compromising with Jewish leadership on campus:
 - Unlike the request made to FCPS for school not to be held on these two significant holidays, we ask instead, that exams and major events not be scheduled for these two days in the name of a more religiously diverse campus.

⁶ "The JCRC Applauds Decision by Three Northern Virginia School Boards to Close Schools on Religious Holidays," JCRC of Greater Washington (The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, December 4, 2020), <https://www.jccouncil.org/statements/jcrc-applauds-decision-three-northern-virginia-school-boards-close-schools-religious>.

Conclusion

George Mason University's website features an article with an important quote written by Damian Cristodero, George Mason University's Senior Communications Manager:

"For Mason, diversity is more than a goal, it is at the very core of our mission of delivering Access to Excellence. Mason has become one of the Commonwealth's leading public research universities as well as the place where students from all backgrounds find pathways to life success,"⁷ - [former] President Anne Holton.

I believe in George Mason University's dedication to excellence and its devotion to maintaining a flourishing diverse community. I also believe that for our university to continuously thrive, it must fulfill the religious diversity needs of its Jewish student body.

There is a reputable list of 215 universities that foster Jewish religious diversity and George Mason University is not included on it. We can change this and use it as motivation in our community to be better. This goal is more than attainable, it can be a standard, if we work together.

By creating and providing access to a qualitative religious observance policy, modeled after other diverse public universities, the Jewish student body and Jewish faculty will be included and visible in George Mason University's vast network of diversity.

⁷ Cristodero, Damian. "Mason Is Virginia's Most Diverse, Most Innovative University," September 9, 2019. <https://www2.gmu.edu/news/2019-09/mason-virginias-most-diverse-most-innovative-university>.

Appendix B

Faculty Success Initiative – Revised Charge

How can we prepare faculty to be successful in the post pandemic university? The initiative will build on existing data regarding supports for and structural constraints to success (e.g., evidence from COACHE survey) as well as additional input from the Faculty Senate with the goal of shaping action plans. The initiative will determine the most pressing concerns from faculty and will create a mechanism by which the Senate holds the administration accountable to addressing its top concerns within a reasonable amount of time.

This initiative will be led by a three-member subcommittee from the Executive Committee (Shannon Davis, Solon Simmons, and Richard Craig) tasked with:

- Partnering with Office of Faculty Affairs and Development to review recent COACHE information and following up with faculty from across the university to triangulate their most pressing concerns (during Fall 2020);
- Partnering with Administration (Provost, President, Senior Vice President) to determine timeline and methods by which the administration will work to address the faculty concerns, including the accountability structure between the administration and the Senate (by April 2021);
- Creating a public-facing reporting/accountability structure for the Initiative.

Next Steps

- Develop dashboard metrics that are agreed upon by faculty and administration.
- Determine accountability processes
 - o Public dashboard
 - o Expectation of administration documenting change over time to General Faculty via Faculty Senate that includes an explanation of deviations (both in positive and negative directions)
 - University level and college/school level
 - Opportunity to increase President's accountability to BOV, Provost to President, deans to Provost, and chairs to deans

Appendix C
Motion Requesting Faculty Matters Committee to Propose Term to Tenure-line Pathway

Proposed by Tim Gibson

Whereas research and teaching are co-equal dimensions of intellectual life at this University.

Whereas research enriches instruction, and Instruction enriches research.

Whereas the Faculty Handbook recognizes the central role of teaching by offering two pathways to tenure: genuine excellence in teaching and genuine excellence in research.

Whereas the principle of tenure is necessary for the protection of academic freedom and the equal participation of faculty in shared governance.

We call on the Faculty Matters committee to:

1. Develop and propose an accessible, fair, and transparent application process for faculty appointed to a specific term to change their limited-term contract positions to tenure-line positions by direct appointment.
2. Develop and propose a tenure-review process for genuine excellence in teaching that is suitable for term faculty whose intellectual identities are centered on instruction and mentoring students.
3. Present a proposal for changing the Faculty Handbook to accomplish the above by March 2022.