New York University
Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee

Advisory on Religious and Spiritual Inclusion in the Classroom
Fall 2017

The UAAC took on the question of students’ religious observance and class attendance in spring 2017, in response to University Senate deliberations regarding the academic calendar. The “University Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays,” which has been in place for several decades, permits students to miss class to observe religious holidays without incurring any penalty. At the beginning of each semester, the Provost sends a reminder about the policy to all faculty. But, as committee members noted, given the religious diversity of our student body and the interactive format of most NYU classes, requests for accommodations often prompt a number of questions. In particular, faculty have asked for clarity about the nature and duration of certain religious holidays, as well as for guidance about how best to ensure that students who miss class remain engaged with course work and discussions.

The committee recommends that online materials be developed to support NYU faculty in accommodating observant students and fostering an inclusive environment in their classes. A new page on the University’s website could provide an overview of existing support structures, such as the Office of Global Spiritual Life; some important facts about particular religious holidays; interfaith calendars; general tips for an inclusive classroom; and teaching strategies that support students who need to miss class, and also benefit those who are able to attend.

Sample text for this web page was drafted in consultation with Yael Shy (Senior Director of Global Spiritual Life) and is included in an appendix to this advisory. Having reviewed this text, the UAAC suggests the following edits and enhancements:

(a) since the text is quite long, it may be desirable to include a section on “frequently asked questions”;

(b) given that the purpose of this resource would be to provide guidance to faculty, the “pedagogical suggestions” should be more explicitly framed as such, so that they are not mistaken for directives;

(c) it should also be made clear that this list of suggestions is not exhaustive and that it will be updated as faculty report on successful strategies that they have adopted; and
(d) guidance should be provided regarding non-classroom-based course components, such as clinical experiences and online sessions.

After these changes are made, the text for the new website should be vetted by the relevant University offices, in particular the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT) and the Office of General Counsel.

Once the page is launched, responsibility for updating it (e.g., adding new pedagogical suggestions from faculty and routinely replacing the links to online interfaith calendars) should be given to an appropriate office or individual. A strategy should also be developed for publicizing this resource within the NYU community. As part of this, schools could be encouraged to announce the website during orientation for new faculty and training for graduate instructors; the CAT could also be invited to offer an annual workshop on related teaching strategies.

Finally, the UAAC notes that there are also effective administrative strategies for accommodating observant students. The committee therefore recommends that a similar informational resource be developed to support NYU colleagues who are responsible for scheduling course sections and co-curricular experiences.