

Date: November 7, 2019

To: Office of the President, Office of Global Programs, Office of Global Inclusion, Office of Student Success, University Senate Academic Affairs Committee; University Senate Financial Affairs Committee; Kathrina O'Mahoney, Senior Director of NYU Dining Services; Owen Moore, Associate Vice President of Campus Services; Marlon Lynch, Senior Vice President of Campus Services and Safety

CC: Islamic Center at New York University

Subject: Observance of Ramadan

To whom this may concern,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Muslim students observing the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the 9th month in the Islamic Calendar, a calendar based on the cycles of the moon. Muslims observe the month of Ramadan to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh¹) according to Islamic belief.

As a result of the lunar calendar, Ramadan moves backward approximately 10 days every year relative to the Gregorian calendar. Thus, for the next decade, Ramadan will be a permanent part of the academic year and will require administrative accommodation from the university.

President Andrew Hamilton has publicly stated that academic success is the main mission of the university. However, in an age of rampant Islamophobia, NYU must commit to ensuring the safety of Muslim students on its campus in order to continue and uphold its core emphasis on academic success. The New York chapter of the Council on American Islamic-Relations reported a "74% increase in anti-Muslim harassment, discrimination, and hate crimes statewide"² after the 2016 election.

¹ <https://www.wisegeek.com/why-do-muslims-use-the-phrase-peace-be-upon-him.html>

² <https://www.cair-ny.org/news/2018/3/5/cair-ny-reports-74-increase-in-anti-muslim-hate-crimes-since-trump-election>

On November 9, 2016, the Tandon prayer room was vandalized with the words “Trump!”, a product of bigotry and hate targetting Muslim students, community members, and Muslim chaplains.³

The NYU Muslim Student Association stated, “We awoke November 9th to a chilling wake-up call, and as we open our eyes and start to move and organize in the face of these new realities, we ask for your support.”

Once more, we call upon New York University to support the Muslim community in a mission of ensuring the well-being, welfare, and belonging of Muslim students during an age of normalized islamophobia. It is important to acknowledge that Muslim students live at the intersection of diverse lived experiences. Many are first-generation, low-income, immigrant, refugee or hold other marginalized identities.

Many factors make the life of a Muslim student in Ramadan more challenging, including increased xenophobia⁴, timings of prayers, *suhor*⁵, and *iftar*⁶.

Day in the Life of a Muslim Student Observing the Fast⁷ <i>These times are a general estimate. Specific times will be available closer to the month.</i>	
3:30 AM	<i>Suhoor</i> . This is the pre-dawn meal that precedes the fast.
4:30 AM	<i>Fajr</i> . Morning prayer.
4:30 AM to 8:00 PM	<i>Fasting hours</i> . Students will have no food or drink during this time as they go to classes and complete other responsibilities.
1:00 PM	<i>Duhr</i> . Noon prayer.
4:30 PM	<i>Asr</i> . Afternoon prayer.
8:00 PM	<i>Maghrib</i> and <i>iftar</i> . Sunset is time for prayer and the breaking of the fast.
9:00 PM	<i>Isha</i> . Night prayer.
10:00 PM to	<i>Taraweeh</i> prayers. These are additional, congregational prayers

³<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-muslim-hate-crime-nyu-vandalism-president-elect-a7412586.html>

⁴ <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/anti-muslim-activity/>

⁵ Suhoor is an Islamic term referring to the meal consumed early in the morning by Muslims before fasting, sawm, in daylight hours during the Islamic month of Ramadan.

⁶ The meal eaten by Muslims to break their fast after sunset every day during Ramadan

⁷ Times change based off of geographic location and legal school

12:00 AM	recited during the month of Ramadan. Many Muslims will perform these prayers every night of Ramadan.
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As depicted in the chart above, Ramadan is not simply limited to fasting throughout the day, but it is a constant series of events, prayers, and preparation.

Some of the adversities Muslim students faced last Ramadan are quoted below:

“I live off-campus and don’t have a meal plan. Suhoor is always a challenge. Sometimes, I forget to eat Suhoor because I don’t have time to cook and I am trying to keep up with my assignments or sleep. And even if—in the very rare event that I can cook a meal— I worry about my roommates waking up since it’s so early in the morning. Last year, during finals, I ended up fasting many days just off of Islamic Center Iftar from the night before. The IC offers resources, but I wish Dining or NYU offered more. I wasn’t aware of the Suhoor kits available last year because I didn’t see any advertising.”

The quote above depicts a small glimpse into the life of a Muslim student and what it is like observing Ramadan during the most stressful time of the academic year without proper assistance from the university. Students have reported a decline in blood sugar to the *“point of crashing, an inability to focus in class, and increased anxiety”*. Due to the lack of accommodation from professors, Muslim students are pressured to make the unjust decision between practicing their religion and succeeding academically, two choices that should coexist.

One Muslim student politely emailed her professor asking to leave a four-hour class for a few minutes to break her fast with water and dates. Despite adhering to university policy, *“That students who anticipate being absent because of any religious observance should, whenever possible, notify faculty in advance of such anticipated absence.”* Her professor replied, *“If you leave class, it will be counted as an unexcused absence.”* He continued to state, *“What religion is that?”* and exhibited a deep ignorance, disregard, and disrespect for Islam.

A vital pillar in creating a safe environment for Muslim students in Ramadan is to educate oneself about the month. Many administrations, faculty, and students do not understand why Muslims fast and frequently default to asking insensitive questions including but not limited to, *“No water? Really?”*, *“Why can’t you eat now, no one’s watching?”* etc. It’s important to try to form your own understanding about the month, and not to rely on Muslim students during their observance. By encouraging student engagement through university-sponsored training and fact sheets, we hope to create a more informed community.

We urge the university to consider how planned events, class, and assignments will

impact practicing Muslim students. The university states “*given the various religious faiths represented on campus and acknowledging the nonsectarian nature of the University, present calendar policy is intended to apply equitably to all religious groups and to provide opportunities to all to meet their religious obligations.*” However, simply stating this idea without implementing supportive measures for students calls for a need for concrete action items to foster a safe, educated, and inclusive culture at the university.⁸

A student confessed, “I am the only [hijabi] Muslim woman in my classes. I already feel like I do not belong sitting in rooms with professors and students that do not look like me. When my professors ask me why I ‘have’ fast, what is ‘that month’, or why I ‘want’ an extension... I feel erased.”

The language used around this month by academics depicts the systemic islamophobia present within our campus. Muslims do not ‘have’ to fast. It is a religious observance that Muslim students choose to participate in and should be respected, like any other faith. When incidences of bias occur Muslim students have found it difficult to report prejudice to the bias hotline while fasting due to the inaccessibility of the platform.

The inaccessibility of the platform is depicted through this testimonial, “*When I’m fasting and trying to figure out how I’m going to pray, what I’m going to break my fast with, and plan for Suhoor, the last thing on my mind is reporting my racist professor. A professor [during Ramadan, Spring 2019] told me ‘believing in one God is stupid’. When I confronted him after class he told me to ‘get used to it’ and ‘move on’. I reached out to my advisor and nothing happened. He affirmed his statement [and responded with] ‘sometimes you have to deal with professors with strong beliefs. It’s a life skill.’ I am so used to microaggressions and islamophobia. I’ve lost faith in reporting them.*”

Fasting students are already working to maintain academic success, job schedules, and extracurriculars in tangent with religious observances. In addition, with an upcoming election year that will be engulfed in anti-Muslim vitriol, it is of utmost urgency to ensure that students are able to report incidences of bias and feel heard. There is a collective need for a more accessible way of reporting incidents that abides by codes of confidentiality.

What abroad sites are already implementing:

New York University, Shanghai Policy⁹

⁸<https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html>

⁹ https://shanghai.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/academic_bulletin_2018-2019_5.pdf

Page 35 of the NYU Shanghai Academic Bulletin:

“New York University, as a nonsectarian institution, adheres to the general policy of including in its official calendar only certain legal holidays. However, it has also long been NYU policy that members of any religious group may, without penalty, excuse themselves from classes when compliance with their religious obligations requires it. In 1988, the University Senate affirmed this policy and passed the following resolution: Students who anticipate being absent because of any religious observance should, whenever possible, notify faculty in advance of such anticipated absence; Whenever feasible, examinations and assignment deadlines should not be scheduled on religious holidays. Any student absent from class because of religious beliefs shall not be penalized for any class, examination, or assignment deadline missed on that day or days. If examinations or assignment deadlines are scheduled, any student who is unable to attend class because of religious beliefs shall be given the opportunity to make up that day or days. No adverse or prejudicial effects shall result to any student who avails himself or herself of the above provisions.”

Not only has there been a history of Muslim students being penalized for their absence during the Islamic month, but many students have experienced backlash from professors. For instance, one student came into class a few minutes late after praying, their professor stated, *“You should have taken a different course during Spring registration if you plan on missing my class.”* Not only was this statement incorrect as students cannot control the timing of their core classes, but deeply rooted in ignorance. Muslim students fasting for over nine hours, with no food and water, are prone to physical exhaustion. They should not face the emotional labor of defending or explaining their religious practices.

Shanghai’s policy depicts more detailed and specific language that should be taken as a model for New York University policy regarding academic accommodations.

New York University, London Policy

NYU London offers a prayer room in Byron Court residential hall and circulates a Google Form a week prior to the start of Ramadan in order to grasp the number of students who will be fasting and will require accommodation.

NYU New York must adopt interactive ways of engaging directly with Muslims students to understand the challenges and needs of students.

New York University, Berlin Policy

NYU Berlin offers a prayer space for students during Ramadan. If any NYU Events were to take place, there would be *separate* food accommodations for those fasting so they

could eat at the event once they had broken their fast. Furthermore, professors and faculty have a more accommodating culture in regards to attendance and homework submission with prior notice.

NYU Abu Dhabi

The official policy¹⁰ on the NYU Abu Dhabi Student Portal mirrors that of the NYU Shanghai campus. Since the Abu Dhabi campus is situated in a Muslim country¹¹, the culture toward Ramadan is more accommodating and offers great inspiration for the New York campus.

“Eid al Fitr and Eid al-Adha are university holidays. During the month of Ramadan, it is discouraged to eat or drink in public. All the restaurants have the blinds down, including the restaurants and dining halls on campus. It is highly encouraged to be considerate and to not eat or drink in class or in public, in general. There are blind around water fountains as well. There are dates and water available in the dining hall for students to break fast. The dining hall also extends the opening hours to accommodate for iftar and suhoor from 2:00-4:00 AM. The majority of classes finish by 5 PM. There are no student or university-led events that would include food before sunset. Large scale university events are postponed until after sunset. For instance, the 2019 Commencement began at 8 PM. If an event occurs during the time of the fast, students are given a break in order to pray and break fast. This occurred during events like ‘Senior Send-Off’ week. There were other accommodations like readily available dates and water on the buses.”

¹²

During Ramadan, there are shorter working hours for all the staff members: 10 AM-3 PM instead of 9-5 PM. There are daily buses for the evening prayers from campus to one of the mosques nearby and there are multiple prayer rooms on campus.

There is a collection of educational resources¹³ curated specifically for Ramadan to educate Abu Dhabi students as best as possible about the meaning of the holy month for Muslims. There are a plethora of community events, discussions about Islam at iftar, Community iftars on/off-campus, etc. There are posters on campus on ‘appropriate behaviour’¹⁴ and educating students on how they can be respectful, mindful, and consider of Muslim students fasting during the month. Not only has this created a safer environment for Muslim students, but it has benefitted non-Muslims in heightening their global perspective and understanding of their peers.

¹⁰ <https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/campus-life/living-in-abu-dhabi/religion-and-spirituality.html>

¹¹ <https://government.ae/en/information-and-services/public-holidays-and-religious-affairs/ramadan>

¹² Abu Dhabi Senator

¹³ <https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/news/latest-news/community-life/2015/july/a-ramadan-story.html>

¹⁴ <https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/news/latest-news/community-life/2018/may/how-non-muslims-can-share-the-spirit-of-ramadan.html>

NYU prides itself on the unique global experience. With fifteen global sites and three degree-granting campuses, it must reorient this mission from simply a capitalist expansion to an expansion of accommodation and fostering a safer community.

We propose that NYU enacts the following changes¹⁵:

1. Offer appropriate academic extensions for students fasting by enforcing the University Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays (i.e. Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr). This includes, but is not limited to, allowing students fasting or celebrating Eid to take their finals or midterms at an allotted time that works for them and offering extensions during times of late-night prayers, especially during the last 10 nights of Ramadan. Students have different thresholds - some prefer taking exams earlier in the day while others prefer taking exams later in the day.
 - a. A practice already in effect is present in the pre-medicine department. Every Jummah¹⁶ Muslim students are able to leave and attend prayer in GCASL Grand Hall and return to take their exams. After 3 PM, a separate classroom and proctor are scheduled for students to complete exams.
 - b. The School of Law allows the taping of law lectures for students who require the accommodation due to prayer.
2. Extend bus hours and safe ride requests since many students will be attending nightly iftars, lectures, and prayers.
 - a. Coordinating a safe ride service that extends outside of residential halls for Muslims commuting past midnight.
 - b. Muslim students, specifically Hijabi black and brown women, experience verbal and physical assault walking home and commuting by subway both during the day and night. Especially in anticipation of the upcoming election year, it is vital that NYU takes the proper measures to ensure the safety of students commuting to and from campus.
3. Offer tailored class accommodations. Many students are more observant with their prayers during the month of Ramadan so we ask that students are given permission to leave class for an appropriate time to pray or break their fast.
4. Foster a culture of respect for people fasting. This could be accomplished through an aggressive campaign effort by the university to educate students, faculty, and administrators on how to better support Muslims students during the month of Ramadan.
 - a. Dates should be readily available in the entryway of buildings by public safety stations.

¹⁵ [NYU Islamic Center Ramadan Presentation](#)

¹⁶ Friday afternoon prayer

5. Have NYU Administration email professors before the month of Ramadan detailing the month and the needs of their students.
6. Organize university-wide Muslim Ally Training and encourage administrators and faculty to participate.
7. Lipton Halal Dining Hours to be extended for Suhoor and Iftar
 - a. UPenn extends two dining hall hours past sunset.¹⁷
 - b. NYU Abu Dhabi extends dining halls from 2:00-4:00 AM
8. Offering a complementary Ramadan meal plan package for Muslim students experiencing food insecurity.
 - a. UC Santa Cruz's Dining services provide a meal plan for students observing Ramadan. This meal plan is ideal for 5 or 7-day meal plan holders, who would be using the Dining Halls less frequently during this month¹⁸
9. Expand on halal options outside of Lipton Dining and including nutritious, affordable halal meals in Kimmel, Palladium, Third North, Weinstein, and Jasper Kane.
 - a. NYU Eats should publicize suhoor kits, Ramadan meal plans, and create posters for Muslim students to be aware of what resources are available to them. For example, "Take a box of Iftar to go!"
10. Consider how planned events, class, and assignments will impact practicing Muslim students.
11. The university must publicly condemn Islamophobia and articulate a clear intention to create a safer environment for Muslim students
12. The bias hotline should be accessible online and must be widely circulated during the month in the event prejudice occurs, especially considering the fact that next year is an election year.
13. Continue the suhoor initiative from the Spring 2019 semester and have to-go boxes available at wide-scale events.
14. Sustainability is the forefront of the conversations between administration and students. In order to prevent food waste and increase New York University's green initiative, the office of sustainability should consider how Muslim students can access food at All-University and club events after the breaking of their fast by incorporating a to-go system.
15. Extend Kimmel and GCASL Hours to accommodate the Islamic Center during Taraweeh prayers without requiring the center to pay for operations cost.
 - a. The Islamic Center at NYU is taxed with paying fees for programming, Despite being situated in the "Global Center for Spiritual Life", the Islamic Center is taxed with paying fees for Taraweeh prayers which extend past GCASL operation hours.

¹⁷<https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/04/penn-ramadan-finals-week-muslim-students-association>

¹⁸ <https://news.ucsc.edu/2019/04/accomodations-ramadan.html>

- b. Every day, several hundred dollars, ranging from \$400-600 that could be used for decreasing food insecurity by creating more suhoor kits and meal vouchers, are instead given to keeping a center dedicated for spiritual and religious practice open for its intended purpose.
- 16. Lessen the burden of cost on the Islamic Center at NYU and contribute to the costs of Iftar.
- 17. Provide resources for Muslim students observing Ramadan while studying abroad.
- 18. Working with operations to create prayer spaces in buildings across the university for students who do not have class in GCASL and are unable to commute to the fourth-floor prayer room.
 - a. Setting up a quiet room with prayer rugs available in Bobst, Silver, School of Professional Studies, etc.

We look forward to your response to this letter and its proposals.

Thank you,

Aya Ouda, Senator at-Large for Muslim Students, Migrants, Refugees, and Undocumented Students and the Director of Communications