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Presidential Policy Memorandum No. 310

TO: Virginia Tech Faculty, Staff, and Students
FROM: Timothy D. Sands
DATE: February 3, 2020
SUBJECT: Accommodating Religious Observances

Approved by Commission on Faculty Affairs:
Approved by the University Council:
Approved by the President:
Effective Date:

November 1, 2019
February 3, 2020
February 3, 2020
February 3, 2020

University Council approved a resolution that added religious observances to the list of matters for which students can seek advocacy by the Dean of Students Office through the absence verification process. The resolution was supported by the Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Graduate Student Assembly, and Student Government Association. The Faculty Handbook and all other relevant documents will be updated accordingly.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that religious observances will be added to the list of matters for which students can seek advocacy by the Dean of Students Office through the absence verification process; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the third paragraph of subsection 9.6.2 of the Faculty Handbook will be combined with 9.6.2.1 and revised.

AND BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Hokie Handbook and all other relevant documents will be updated to reflect these changes.

Following is the text of the resolution in its entirety.

WHEREAS, students have expressed concerns to the Student Government Association (SGA) and Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) about Virginia Tech guidelines regarding absences for religious holidays; and

WHEREAS, some students have been compelled to attend classes during Yom Kippur, Maha Shivaratri, Eid, and other days of religious significance that require fasting, prayer, or repenting; and

WHEREAS, Virginia Tech seeks to put into practice the affirmations outlined in our Principles of Community, including mutual understanding, civility, and the value of human diversity; and

WHEREAS, students seek a broader definition of “religious holiday” that encompasses religious, cultural, ethnic, meaning-making, and faith-based beliefs; and

WHEREAS, though Virginia Tech faculty support the accommodation of religious beliefs, as well as the broader definition of religious holidays in the previous statement, they are not in a position to verify absences for religious observances; and

WHEREAS, the Jewish Student Union, Graduate Student Assembly, Student Government Association, and Hillel at Virginia Tech were involved in the creation of and support this resolution; and

WHEREAS, the Asian American Student Union, HokiePRIDE, the Latin American Student Organizations, the Muslim Student Union, Native at VT, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, the Sikh Student Association, and the Black Organizations Council support this resolution; and

WHEREAS, the Office of the Dean of Students supports this resolution; and

WHEREAS, the Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity supports this resolution; and

WHEREAS, the resolution maintains faculty members’ ability to uphold the academic integrity of their courses while providing more guidance for students and faculty in dealing with the issue of religious absences; and

WHEREAS, though the Office of the Dean of Students can currently provide absence verification (advocacy) for “illness or death of a family member or friend, off-campus medical appointments or hospital admission, court subpoenas, and military orders,” the Faculty Handbook does not include this information and it is added here;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that religious observances will be added to the list of matters for which students can seek advocacy by the Dean of Students Office through the absence verification process; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the third paragraph of subsection 9.6.2 of the Faculty Handbook will be combined with 9.6.2.1 and revised as follows:

Current Faculty Handbook language:

9.6.2 (3rd paragraph):

When students cannot attend a class, it is their responsibility to make arrangements for any work missed as soon as possible. In cases of prolonged absences, students may ask their academic deans or the dean of students to notify their instructors of the reason for their absence. Staff members from the Office of the Dean of Students may verify absences from class for students who have documentation to support an absence beyond their control. The staff members send an absence verification notice to the college dean, who then forwards the verification to faculty members. A staff member from the Office of the Dean of Students reinforces that the student is responsible for contacting the faculty member to arrange make up of any missed work.

9.6.2.1 (in its entirety):

Consistent with the university's tradition of religious tolerance, faculty are encouraged to be sensitive to students who wish to observe religious holidays. The student is responsible for requesting and providing justification for a religious accommodation, preferably during the first two weeks of classes or as soon as the student becomes aware of the need for an accommodation. Faculty should inform students of their willingness to make accommodations for reasonable requests. Faculty are not required to compromise the academic integrity of the course to accommodate religious practices. Thus, the faculty member determines accommodations for religious practices that are consistent with his or her class attendance policy.

Proposed Faculty Handbook language:

9.6.2 in its entirety (with new 3rd and 4th paragraphs in quotes):

Class meetings are an integral part of most courses and the central component of many. Therefore, both faculty and students are expected to meet at all regularly scheduled times, except for cancellations announced on a university-wide basis by appropriate authority.

If a faculty member cannot meet a class, departmental procedures should be followed so that appropriate measures are taken to provide for the missed class.

“If a student cannot attend a class, they may notify their instructor(s) directly or contact the Office of the Dean of Students, whose staff can provide advocacy through its absence verification process. The Office of the Dean of Students considers absence verification for any of the following reasons: illness or death of a family member or friend; off-campus medical appointments or hospital admission; court subpoenas; military orders; and observances of religious, cultural, ethnic, meaning-making, or faith-based beliefs. Staff members send an absence verification notice to the college dean, who then forwards the verification to the instructor(s). If upon a good-faith evaluation an instructor believes that accommodating an absence negatively affects the course of study, students can contact the Office of the Dean of Students for continued advocacy and guidance. Students are responsible for making arrangements with the instructor as soon as possible to complete any work missed due to absence. If this work differs from the original exam or assignment, it must be appropriately related to course objectives and no more difficult than the original.

“Faculty determine their attendance policy, including whether they will accommodate absences and how they will do so. However, in accordance with the Virginia Tech Principles of Community, faculty are encouraged to accommodate students when the observance of religious, cultural, ethnic, meaning-making, or faith-based beliefs conflict with academic requirements. Students who choose to request an excused absence directly from their instructor(s) due to a religious observance should do so during the first two weeks of classes or as soon as they become aware of the need for an accommodation.”

Policy 5600, “Authorized Closings,” defines the process followed when the university is affected by inclement weather, natural disasters, emergencies and other conditions that may cause operations to be suspended or curtailed. University employees should consult Policy 4305, “Policy on Compensation. During Authorized Closings,” for specific expectations in the event of a closure and information about supervisor/employee responsibilities, leave usage, and compensation.

AND BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Hokie Handbook and all other relevant documents will be updated to reflect these changes.

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