

Good afternoon Chair Barnes and Delegates of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Farah Helal and I am a junior at UMBC and a constituent of District 9B.

Though I am a Student Regent on the University System of Maryland, Board of Regents, I am not testifying on behalf of the Board or the System. I am here to testify in support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Acevero based on my understanding of the student experience at my own campus and on others across the state.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Widmar v. Vincent* that the first amendment protects students and student organizations' ability to freely and voluntarily exercise their religion at public institutions and that those same institutions cannot inhibit a person's ability to freely practice, yet in my experience there are not adequate accommodations for faith-based practices at several higher education institutions across the state. It is our state legislature's responsibility to remedy this deficiency.

As a Muslim I am required to pray 5 times during specific periods of the day. During our prayers, we cannot speak to anyone and no one should walk in front of us. It is disheartening that at times there are no places for me to fulfill this religious obligation without interruptions on campus. When designated prayer spaces are too far from my classes or being booked for other university activities like yoga sessions or staff meetings, I have had to pray in empty classrooms, stairwells, and hallways all while hoping that no one wanders in and disrupts my prayer.

Oftentimes, our major holidays fall during ordinary days in the semester and unexcused absences or an inability to make up assignments or assessments inhibits our ability to take the day off for religious services and obligations.

These are just some of my experiences as a Muslim student, but I could speak for hours about the experiences of students across the state and from different faiths. Most campuses are making an active effort to accommodate students' faith based needs with support from faculty and staff, but some campuses are lacking in basic necessities. Please vote in favor of House Bill 912 as it requires our higher education institutions to fulfill their constitutional obligation to protect students first amendment rights by addressing the unique needs of the student population on their campus.

Thank you.