

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. I want to start off by giving a brief introduction of myself and my involvement in faith based organizations while an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland in College Park the past four years. My name is Arzoo Paracha. I joined the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a freshman and later served as the Vice President this past year from May 2021- 2022, as well as various leadership roles in the founding class of Mu Delta Alpha, a professional and social sorority for Muslim women and the only chapter of this sorority in Maryland. I also served as a student advisor on the Vice President of Student Affairs' Advisory Council that same year, on behalf of the Muslim community at large at the University of Maryland, to help advise on policy related to the administration of the school and voice concerns of the specific demographic of Muslims on campus.

Given these roles, I have learned a lot about the administration's views of the importance of religious freedom and support for spiritual growth while on campus, as well as had a chance to understand how much Muslim students collectively believe in the value of everything this bill provides including excused absences for religious holidays and access to a religious space as these are things we have asked the school for as an MSA.

House Bill 912 calls for a space provided on campus for faith based practices. The University of Maryland in College Park is unique in the fact that the administration does work hard to listen to the community's interfaith needs for prayer spaces. We have a chapel on our campus where anyone is free to practice their faith and different chaplains of many faiths serve to provide spiritual guidance and advice to students. We also have an ample additional prayer space that we as Muslims tend to use for our five daily prayers, religious lectures, community socials, and much more.

We refer to this space as our campus Musallah which was established about 20 years ago using a repurposed women's locker room that we recently renovated to an even larger space in 2021. This space served as a spiritual home for me in my four years on campus. It is a space I have gone to for guidance, advice, support, healing, and friendship. Looking back to my freshman year, when I came in nervous and new, I met some of my first and closest friends in the Musallah. They welcomed me with open arms into the community and supported me as mentors throughout my freshman year to help me adjust to campus life. The Musallah was a space I could

come to when I was feeling low or stressed and gain healing spiritually, as well as physically gain support from other students.

This space allowed me to continue working on my spirituality in the midst of studying for my classes. In addition to it being a community space, a variety of MSA events were held in the Musallah such as a Jeopardy Night which have allowed me to create so many unforgettable memories here and develop an attachment to this space. Our newly renovated Musallah had the capability to be such an impactful space for UMD students, especially in post COVID-19 virtual times and in times of hardship, in reuniting the community and giving everyone a shine of hope.

Overall, the accessibility to this prayer space significantly improved my academic, spiritual, and social growth, and my mental health while on campus. I believe all students in Maryland of every faith should be granted a similar interfaith space to grow. I have heard horror stories from other Maryland schools where students are still fighting for a religious prayer space and have been ignored. Their religious freedom is not being met. As stated earlier, our prayer space was converted into a nice space from an old women's locker room, so I believe finding and renovating an old room or unused space to give students for prayer should not be such a difficult task- and passing this bill would help ensure all public institutions actively work to create this space.

The bill also calls for a written policy for academic accommodations for students to practice religious beliefs including up to three excused absences. Currently, at the University of Maryland College Park, allowing excused religious holidays is more so up to the discretion of the professor. Muslims celebrate two main religious holidays: Eid ul Fitr and Eid al Adha which the dates change for every calendar year based on moon sighting. We also observe the holy month of Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic (Lunar) Calendar where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and practice late night prayers. We use this time for religious devotion and spiritual reflection.

Fasting can bring on increased stress and fatigue. Every year, as an MSA, we try to help Muslim students by providing them an email template to reach out to their professors to ask for excused holidays on Eid and offering appropriate academic accommodations for students fasting, such as assignment extensions, exam rescheduling, and permission to break fasts and pray after sunset. Although some professors were accommodating, others refused accommodations and some students were inevitably unable to celebrate Eid while isolated on campus, or failed exams/ assignments due to a lack of understanding of the physical/ mental toll fasting can take on a person.

Fasting is practiced by students of other faiths too. Examples include Lent in Christianity and Yom Kippur in Judaism.

Passing this bill would allow for students to focus on spiritual growth without the stress and anxiety of undue academic burdens. Passing this bill would allow students to celebrate and reflect with family and friends. Excused religious holidays would no longer be at the discretion

of the professor and have to be fought for, as they would be mandated by the public institution. By voting in favor of the bill, you are supporting students' well-being and allowing more appreciation for diversity and inclusion as students and professors gain knowledge of religious holidays. You are ensuring students' rights to religious freedom, and allowing an opportunity for a more improved academic journey. You would guarantee students of all faiths have this support to practice their faith in the future. Given these reasons, I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of House Bill 912 and help make a positive impact on student lives. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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