

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:

My name is Surriya Alima and I thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. For far too long, too many students of different faiths have struggled to find ways to practice their religion at institutions of higher learning while pursuing an education. But Maryland lawmakers like you now have the opportunity to pass a new law in our state that could finally begin to help change that.

House Bill 912, introduced by Delegate Gabriel Acevero, seeks to make sure that institutions of higher learning that receive public funding develop policies regarding reasonable religious accommodations for students on their campuses. This includes up to three excused absences during regular semesters for religious holidays, as well as space(s) for faith-based activities.

As a junior at the University of Maryland College Park campus, I have personally witnessed the impact that a lack of faith-based accommodations can have in this environment. In my own family, my sister, a practicing Muslim, started her journey in higher education at Montgomery College's Germantown campus during the Fall 2019 semester, where she struggled with the lack of reasonable accommodations as a student.

On average, these daily prayers take about three to five minutes to complete. At this campus, the space made available for students to pray in 2019 was located next to the bathroom in the building for Higher Technology and Science Center (HT). Oftentimes, students who were performing their prayers were distracted by other students walking in front of them while they prayed, which is considered sacrilegious. The students were made to pray next to the toilets, which is unhygienic, in a small and cramped space capable of accommodating no more than two students at a time.

These daily prayers must be performed within specific windows of time. The circumstances facing my sister and other students trying to practice their faith forced them to have to choose between saying their prayers and being late to class, or skipping their prayers in order to make it to their next class on time. No student should ever be faced with such a difficult decision when choosing to pursue higher education.

In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when my sister and other students returned to in-person classes at the Montgomery College campus, praying at the HT building was no longer an

option. There were no further instructions on where Muslim students could perform their prayers. This left my sister with the impossible choice of either praying in her car, or waiting until she returned home to pray.

When my sister started attending classes at Montgomery College's Rockville campus, she discovered that there was no space for Muslim students to perform their prayers there either. A designated shared space for self-reflection was set up in such a way that students choosing to pray here had to do so while sitting on chairs, something that one is allowed to do only when experiencing specific health restrictions.

My sister and others had to defy that etiquette, because neither prayer mats nor adequate prayer spaces were available on that campus. Many students were forced to bring their own prayer mats and simply pray in whatever suitable space they could find, risking interruption and distractions, or waiting until they went home to pray.

It's very hard to watch someone you love and care about faced with this predicament. This reasonable, commonsense bill would not apply to online colleges and universities that have a one hundred percent virtual student population. It reduces the number of excused absences for abbreviated semesters from three to one, to factor in condensed lessons and assignments packed into a shorter period of time.

The fact is that faith plays an enormous role in many people's lives. It helps students navigate challenges in their academic careers. It is unacceptable that the State of Maryland currently does not have a law that requires institutions of higher education to develop policies for reasonable religious accommodations for students.

Regardless of their religion, no student should ever have to face a situation where they have to choose between it and their pursuit of an education. On Thursday, March 9, members of the House Appropriations Committee will be hearing testimonies on HB912. They will have the choice to help support students' success and defend religious freedom in our state.

On behalf of my sister, I join the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, in urging the committee to vote in favor of this long overdue bill. Thousands of students of different faiths and backgrounds are counting on Maryland lawmakers to take a stand for them by supporting this legislation.

I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of passing HB912. You would be making a difference in literally thousands of students' lives across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Sariyya Alima  
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