



March 9, 2023

**HB 912
Public Institutions of Higher Education – Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic
Accommodations Policy**

**House Appropriations Committee
Position: FAVORABLE**

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of House Bill 912. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

House Bill 912 would require each public institution of higher education to adopt academic policies for religious accommodation for its students. The policies would provide students with up to three excused absences per academic trimester for class time missed due to faith-based holidays or organized religious activities. The policies would also require accommodation for missed examinations during the same holidays or organized faith-based activities. Students would be required to inform course instructors of the need for such accommodation in the first two weeks of the academic semester. This bill would also provide space accommodations for faith-based or religious practices.

One suggestion to ensure the constitutional integrity of this bill would be to add clarifying language that a student’s failure to provide notice of an accommodation request within the fourteen-day period at the beginning of a semester does not render them ineligible for the accommodation. A provision such as approval upon request to an academic dean in instances of failure to request might ensure a lenient balance in individual accommodations commensurate with constitutional rights.

Our state is deeply rooted in religious liberty, founded as a bastion of tolerance over and above others from the outset. Maryland’s Catholic bishops have stated, “Religious liberty in this country began with the founding of Maryland. We must honor our state’s unique role in the preservation and promotion of this fundamental principle of government.” (*The Most Sacred of All Property: Religious Freedom and the People of Maryland*, Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Maryland, 2011).

As “(i)ndividuals who are free to exercise religious liberty are free to live out their faith in service to others and to build up the common good”, our state should strive to protect and respect the religious liberty inherent to, and guaranteed by, our Maryland State Constitution. (*supra*) House Bill 912 upholds these liberties through common sense accommodations, and it is for that reason that we request that this committee issue a favorable report on this bill.