

HB0699

FWA (Favorable with Amendments)

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I am a student at Towson University, majoring in molecular biology and minoring in physics. I work as a science tutor and I attend college on a full-tuition academic scholarship. I say all of this not to gloat, rather, to demonstrate I am not anti-science in the slightest, as some might claim. I am one of the few students that did not receive any dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, through the religious exemption. I do not want to focus on why I did not choose to get the vaccine during this short speech, rather, on my experience as an unvaccinated student at Towson as well as the experiences of some of my friends.

In emails from the school the summer before we finally returned to school, Towson hinted at consequences for uncompliant unvaccinated students, leaving it intentionally vague. From what I've gathered, students that missed more than 2 testing days a semester were warned they would be unenrolled from their classes. I was never made aware of what those consequences were if I were to miss a testing day. I heard rumors about revoking internet privileges, but nothing more substantial from the university.

During the fall 2021 semester, I had to get tested twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays. They assigned everyone that was unvaccinated as either a Monday/Wednesday group, or a Tuesday/Thursday group without checking class schedules. It wasn't a huge setback for me, since my apartment is a 3-minute walk from the testing center, located in the first floor of a parking garage, but for others, it was, and barely aligned with their schedules. The testing center is located on the opposite side of campus from all of the academic buildings. My one friend, a double math/chemistry major who was taking 19 credits at the time, had to walk 30 minutes across campus from the science building to the testing center, then 30 minutes back. It might not seem like a big deal, but for an extremely busy student who also works part-time, it adds up, and it's a major inconvenience. I have another friend who after emailing back and forth with the health center several times, finally convinced them that he had absolutely no space in his schedule for the bi-weekly tests. The agreement was that they would hand him a garbage bag full of take-home test kits, and he would have to submit a picture twice a week and return the unused ones at the end of the semester.

During the fall 2021 semester, Towson gave the option for some professors to view a checklist on students' phones before allowing them entrance into the class. There was a different checklist for vaccinated and unvaccinated students, so even without specifically saying that a student had an exemption, professors that used this tool could easily tell whether or not a student entering was unvaccinated. Not only does this violate medical privacy, but also leads to discrimination.

During the spring 2022 semester, Towson mandated the booster shot and upgraded to a KN95 mask mandate. My first day of the semester, I was hyperventilating wearing the new mask. I found it ridiculous that even the CDC didn't even recommend the general public to wear those types of masks, and certainly not for long periods of time, yet Towson was still mandating it. I was growing increasingly angry at Towson. I could go to the grocery store, to church, anywhere else without wearing a mask, let alone a KN95, yet at school, I still had to wear one, and I wasn't able to see my classmates or professors

faces. I realized during the first week of the semester that if you wore a regular mask, no one cared. Not even the professors that specified in their syllabuses you had to wear the KN95s enforced the rule. Soon, they dropped all mask mandates out of nowhere and reduced the testing to once a week. I remember sitting in class reading the email that the mask mandates were lifted, trembling, trying to hold back giddiness and glee.

Now, there are no more mask, or testing mandates. The vaccine and testing requirements quietly faded. I didn't get any emails over the last summer that testing requirements for unvaccinated students were dropped. I thought there was some mistake when I didn't get any emails telling me my weekly testing day. There was no email saying that Towson no longer required any vaccine. Vague communications about this on the part of Towson were a common theme throughout the past two years.

Throughout all of this, I felt like my college experience was severely dampened by all of the mandates and politics. I never got the Gardasil vaccine when I was a teenager for similar reasons: I wasn't at risk for what it was supposedly protecting against and I heard of a lot of bad side effects. Yet, I don't get the feeling that if anyone knows that I never had the Gardasil vaccine, I will lose the few friendships I have and sacrifice relationships with professors. However, with the covid-19 vaccine, I have to hide it away, a secret portion of my identity. This is coming from a population that is extremely low-risk for severe illness. I don't believe that the campus environment surrounding unvaccinated students would be so severe if there were never any mandates in place. The messaging surrounding mandates is that someone who did not receive the covid-19 vaccine is so dangerous that they should not be allowed in class without stringent testing, even those that refuse the vaccine for medical reasons are a strain on society and need to be socially isolated. I can't tell how many off-handed remarks I've heard from classmates and co-workers about how stupid unvaccinated people must be. During these tough conversations, I avert eye-contact and try to talk about something else. Even though I feel guilty for my cowardice in these situations, I am 99% certain that coming out of the closet regarding my vaccination status would result in shame and rejection, not acceptance.

I eventually plan to move out of Maryland. I don't think I'll be able to find a job or grow any friendships here. Even if I were able to live in a more conservative area, my representation in Annapolis will hardly represent me or my interests. Is this what you want for Maryland? For everyone with differing political perspectives to flee your state in search of community and prosperity because they can't find it here. I don't actually want to move away from my family and life here, but I feel as if I have no choice. My college experiences with these mandates have further affirmed this. Thank you.