How to Achieve Islamic Holidays on Campus

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The Muslim Accomodations Task Force

The Muslim Accommodations Task Force (MATF) of MSA National works to make campuses better places for Muslim students. "Muslim-friendly" campuses are ones that embrace diversity by fulfilling the needs of their Muslim communities. Students and administrators work hand in hand to promote programs that facilitate multiple facets of a student's life, ranging from praying to learning to dining.

We believe that every campus can improve in meeting Muslim student needs. As you will see, becoming "Muslim-friendly" is not a one-size-fits all process. This guide is created to help you explore the options available, select the level appropriate to your campus, and tailor your efforts accordingly.

Know that achieving Muslim accommodations on your campus requires planning and persistent effort. As a source of inspiration, we share with you a hadith. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "..he who finds relief for one who is hard pressed, Allah would make things easy for him in the Hereafter." (Sahih Muslim Book 035, Number 6518). Inshaallah the results of your efforts will make life easier for generations of students after you, and thereby leave you with a legacy of reward.

Please refer to the resource section at the end of this guide for information on services we provide. Sincere thanks is due first to Allah (swt) then to all the students, alumni, and advisors who contributed their experiences and thoughts.

What are Islamic Holidays?

The two annual Islamic holidays are Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The term Eid is Arabic for festivity or celebration. Eid al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, a month long period of worship and contemplation. During Ramadan, several restraints are placed upon the daily lives of Muslims. Among other things they are not allowed to eat or drink during daylight hours, and the fast is broken at the end of the day with prayer and a meal. The fast is resumed the next morning. Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast) occurs at the end of Ramadan and is marked by a special congregational prayer in the morning, followed by visiting and celebrating with family and friends, elaborate meals, and the exchange of gifts. Eid al-Adha is the commemoration of sacrifice endured by Abraham, who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of his beloved son Ismail. It also marks the end of the annual Hajj pilgrimage season.

Similar to Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha begins with congregational prayer and a sermon in the morning and is followed with time with family and friends feasting and exchanging gifts.

On Fridays, Muslims have a weekly holiday hour, when they must congregate for the Friday talk and prayer, Salatul Jumua. Friday prayer is at the time of the early afternoon prayer, typically between 1:00 and 2:30 depending on geographical location and time of the year. The prayer must be performed within a specified time frame and the congregation must be of at least four people.

Visit our website www.msanational.org/matf/holidayguide for access to Islamic Holidays Supplement A: Detailed Islamic Holiday definitions

Choose The Right Level To Meet Your Needs _____

Almost all Muslim accommodations come in different levels. The key is to recognize what your campus and especially Muslim students on campus are ready to sustain for the long term

LEVEL 1 Declaring tentative Eid al-Adha and Eid ul-Fitr dates on all academic and/or religious calendars.

LEVEL 2 Announcing confirmed Eid dates and informing the campus community of possible Muslim student absence by e-mail or voicemail.

LEVEL 3 Not scheduling exams on the days of the two Islamic holidays and/or during the Friday prayer.

LEVEL 4 Making Eid an official campus holiday.

LEVEL 5 Making Friday prayer hour an official campus holiday hour.

The Process: Steps to Islamic Holidays on Campus

1	2	3	4
Assessment	Presentation	Implementation	Long-term Survival

1

Assessment

Engaging in the assessment process in consultation with the Muslim community at large will inshallah serve two benefits:

1) It will provide MSA representatives a solid proposal, backed with facts and evidence, with which to negotiate with university officials.

2) It will ensure community support for and participation in a sustained program. As with any type of Muslim religious accommodation, a failed experience will make future negotitions with university officials more difficult.

Before you begin to lobby your university administration to recognize Islamic holidays on campus, it is critical to assess both

a) Current holiday recognition on campus (Supply)

b) The size and needs of the Muslim population at your school (Demand)

In evaluating the status quo of what holidays are available, it is important to keep in mind the following questions:

Current Holiday Recognition (Supply)

1. Are any special interest groups receiving accommodations at your college/ university? Which Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant holidays are currently acknowledged or recognized?

2. Precisely what is the current level of accommodation offered (if any)? Levels include: Declaration of Islamic holidays on calendars, e-mail or voicemail announcements, exam scheduling consideration, and official suspension of classes.

It is important to make sure that the type of holiday accommodation the university may be willing to offer matches the needs of the Muslim community on your campus. To a large extent, what the university is willing to offer will depend on Muslim demographics and demonstration of current hardships imposed on the Muslim community.

Muslim Population Size and Needs (Demand)

Therefore, it is necessary to survey the relevant Muslim population (students, faculty, administrators, doctors, employees, etc.) to determine the following:

a) Size (or relative size to other groups receiving special treatment, ie Jewish, Cathoic, and Protestant students)

Size is a useful indicator to know when negotiating with university officials, to strengthen the case for needing such a program.

b) Demographics (current and projected)

Demographics can help to demonstrate the need and should draw upon national, state, and local (your campus) statistics.

c) Hardship

In the absence of recognition of Islamic holidays, what are Muslim students currently doing? Are they missing classes and being deprived of academic benefits? Are they being forced to choose between taking an exam and observing a holiday?

d) Observance

Where do students currently go to observe Islamic holidays? Is an Eid service held on campus? What about a Friday prayer service? How far do students go for these services, and how much time is involved?

e) Anticipated holiday dates

During which holidays are classes in session? Are required classes, labs, and exams held during Friday prayer? Will either Eid al-Fitr or Eid al-Adha coincide with final exams in the next five years? Will either Eid al-Fitr or Eid al-Adha coincide with existing campus holidays (winter break, spring break) in the next five years?

2

Presentation

Leadership

As with most MSA tasks, leadership is essential. Once your MSA decides to make a case for Islamic holidays on campus, effective leadership will play a major role in the outcome of the endeavor. We recommend one or two committed students who agree to oversee all aspects of the project. Ideally, these students should have played a role in the assessment phase, and if not, should have a thorough understanding of the nature of assessment. They should also review the definition of Islamic holidays, and be prepared to express the Muslim students needs based on findings from the assessment phase. Because of the possibility that the endeavor will take more than one term, leaders should thoroughly document everything. Practically, this can be as simple as a notebook of meeting dates, times, participants, and minutes.

Contact Administrative Allies

Administrators that the MSA interacts with on a regular basis (faculty advisors, Dean of Students, Student Programs Director, Campus Ministry or Student Religious Life Office) typically are excellent people to discuss your proposal with. If you have positive relations with any administrators, you should inform them of your intention to increase recognition of Islamic holidays on campus, get their input, and see if they are interested in helping or have procedural suggestions. These allies will help you to determine what steps are needed to make such a change on campus - a presentation to the Senate, approval of the University President, discussions with the provost, or other means.

Communicating your proposal

In conversations with administrators who become involved in approving the project, emphasize the following points which are relevant to your campus's context:

a) Requirements
Explain what the two Eids represent, and how important they are in a Muslim student's life. Take a calendar of projected Islamic holidays along with the academic calendar to show how the two intersect. Administrators will be happy to know that some holidays do not interfere with class schedules (when Eid is on a weekend or on a scheduled university holiday). Particularly in oral presentations, try to put a personal touch to the Eid experience - a story of joyfully celebrating Eid with family as a child or the difficulty experienced in missing a class for a holiday in the past.

b) Respecting Diversity
Most campuses include respecting diversity as a part of their mission statement. They consider enrollment of diverse students an asset to the community, as they enhance the classroom learning experience and enrich student life. Try to find these statements specific to your campus, and explain that recognition of Islamic holidays would serve as a practical example of upholding these ideals. If any cases of bias against Muslims took place on campus in the recent past, present the proposal as an opportunity to foster cooperation and increase understanding.

c) Muslim students need
The information gathered during the assessment phase should help to articulate Muslim students needs concretely - demographics, current hardship, and current observance. Additionally, if special holiday recognition is being offered to other faith communities (Jewish, Catholic, Protestant), Muslims have strong grounds to make a petition for equal consideration of their holiday requirements.

d) National trends and publicity
Other campuses already have recognized Islamic holidays, and are being recognized nationally for their efforts. The college or university will benefit by having a reputation for caring for their Muslim students. Provide a complete list (updated on www.msanational.org/matf), then give detailed examples based on what you consider to be the ideal option for your campus.

3

Implementation

Education

Throughout the presentation phase, education most likely focuses on administrators and key decision makers among the student body. Once an Eid holiday is approved, education should spread to include the entire campus community. The MSA should sponsor Eid related events, create educational Eid displays, and publish a news story in the campus newspaper.

Determining Eid holiday dates

The exact date of Eid can be a contentious issue among Muslim communities. Many believe that the date of Eid cannot be determined except the night before Eid al-Fitr, or ten days prior to Eid al-Adha because of lunar sighting requirements. Muslim students and their communities have successfully dealt with the ambiguity related to Eid in the following ways:

a) For calendars that must be printed months in advance, the tentative date is printed, with an asterisk (*) and a footnote explaining, "Subject to lunar sighting"

b) For e-mail and voice-mail announcements, the MSA stays in touch with the administrator in charge to communicate the confirmed Eid date.

c) For official suspension of classes on Eid, the campus Muslim communities decided they would rather have an Eid holiday celebrated one day off the mark than to not have one at all. There is still a good chance of having the first day of Eid coincide with the predicted date, and if not, it most likely will fall on one of the three days of Eid. Additionally, the day can be used as an opportunity to educate the community of the Islamic holiday, whether or not it is on the exact day.

4

Long-term Survival

Now that the Eid holiday has been recognized, the MSA should work to help the program grow and improve. At least one MSA member in communication with the MSA Executive Committee / Shura should be in charge of overseeing existing Muslim accommodations. The MSA should have a regular Eid holiday campaign, including decorating the campus, hosting events for the campus community, and possibly distributing Eid treats or creating a display right before Eid. For Eid al-Fitr, the entire month of Ramadan provides an opportunity to host events that explain Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. Similarly, the ten days of Hajj prior to Eid al-Adha can be used to increase awareness of Hajj. The MSA should be sure to thank supportive administrators and invite them to join in festivities. They should also contact the media (on campus, local, national) to publicize the recognition of Eid on their campus.

To sustain approval of Eid holidays for the long term, the MSA should try to link the Eid holiday recognition to recognition of any other religious holidays (Jewish, Christian, Protestant.) In this way, all holidays will be approved or rejected together.

In order to institutionalize the program, publicity should reach every student and prospective student. Practical publicity points to sustain a long-term program include roles for administrators and the MSA. Calendars and announcements should be made to include Eid, and whoever designs the calendars for the university should know how to find out projected Eid dates. Offices of Campus Ministry, student life, or religious life should be made aware of the holiday. The MSA should be in regular contact with administrators to inform them of projected Eid dates. The MSA should include information on Islamic holidays on their website section for new students and inform them at orientation events. Report the success to MSA National www.msanational.org/matf so prospective students will know of Islamic holidays on your campus…they may even decide to attend your campus instead of the closest competitor because of the Islamic holiday program.

Sample Success Stories

Syracuse celebrates Eid since 1995!

When Syracuse decided to make Eid an official campus holiday in 1995, the story made news in the media and among the Muslim community. The recognition came much before the United States Postal Service issued the Eid stamp. For almost a decade, Syracuse was the only known university in the US to close for the Eid holiday.

Here's how they did it:

1 Assessment
Since Imam Ahmed Kobeisy became a volunteer chaplain and member of the Syracuse Chaplain's Council in 1990, he realized many Muslim student needs were not being met, and that other faith communities had official recognition of their holidays.

2 Presentation
He presented to the Calendar Committee, which sets the 5-year calendar for Syracuse, the idea of having the two Eid holidays included as official holidays. The Committee felt two days was too much, so the Muslim community agreed to include only Eid al-Fitr. Of the seven members, four wanted to eliminate all holidays rather than adding more, while three favored adding Eid al-Fitr. Senior administrators became involved as eliminating all religious holidays would be a major decision, and all favored adding Eid al-Fitr.

3 Implementation
The calculations projected by ISNA are used to submit Eid al-Fitr dates every five years. The MSA holds events and distributes informative fliers to increase awareness of Eid celebration on campus.

4 Long-term Survival
At any five year juncture, the Calendar Committee could vote to eliminate all religious holidays. Since all religious holidays are linked (Yom Kippur, Good Friday, and Eid al-Fitr), a decision to discontinue recognition would affect Jews, Catholics, and Muslims. In 2000, the Committee voted to continue religious holidays until 2005, and InshaAllah the recognition will continue in the future.

ADVICE: Be persistent, and communicate your rights. If you ask for nothing, you will get nothing.

SUNY Albany Senate Passes Eid Holiday Bill!

Closing classes for Eid at SUNY Albany is a milestone for Muslim students, as it represents the first public institution to achieve such a victory. In the spring of 2004, the University Senate passed Bill 0304-28, which called for suspension of classes on Eid for the 2004-2005 academic year. Since 1995, Syracuse University, a private university, was the only known institution to close for Eid holidays.

Here's how they did it:

1 Assessment

The MSA began by researching the feasibility of having an Eid holiday. In order to learn from past pioneers, they met with advisors who facilitated Eid holidays at Syracuse, and consulted with MSA National's MATF, which provided news stories related to the growing recognition of Eid. To make an argument for local recognition, they collected demographic information on Muslims at SUNY Albany and in the Capital District, and cases of bias in the New York area. They also briefly researched the history of currently recognized Christian and Jewish holidays at SUNY Albany. They settled on following Eid dates projected by ISNA.

2 Presentation

Once the MSA decided the initiative was worth pursuing, they gathered broad support in preparation for presentation. In addition to all the research compiled in the assessment phase, they acquired letters of support from MSA National, area mosques, and campus Chapel House Ministers representing Catholic, Jewish and Protestant leaders. The MSA President and spokesperson then made an oral and written presentation to the University Life Council. After the University Life Council supported the initiative, the Council worked with the MSA to draft a bill for presentation to the University Senate. The Senate voted 13-9 in favor of the bill.

3 Implementation

Both Eids will be placed on the academic calendar as official holidays. Of these, Eid al-Fitr falls on a weekend, when classes are not held. Eid al-Adha will be on a Friday, which would otherwise be a normal class day. The SUNY Albany MSA, in conjunction with national organizations, plans to publicize the success through events and the media during both Eids.

4 Long-term Survival

The bill is valid for one year, after which the Senate will reconsider the recognition of religious holidays. Inshaallah, the SUNY Albany MSA plans to continue to work with its allies to ensure the continuation of the official Eid holiday.

ADVICE: Coordinate work with campus, local, and national organizations.

Visit our website www.msanational.org/matf/holidayguide for access to Islamic Holidays Supplement B: SUNY Albany Bill 0304-28 (the Eid Holiday Bill).

Case Western Reserve University –
No Classes During Friday Prayer!

As of 2003, Case Western Reserve University holds University Community Hour from 12:30-1:45 pm on Fridays, enabling Muslim students to pray Friday prayer without missing classes. Though the MSA played no role in the establishment of the University Community Hour, we believe the unique idea can be implemented on other campuses.

Here's how they did it:

1 Assessment

Discussion centered around student willingness to endure late afternoon Friday classes, keeping in mind student choices, faculty freedom, and space utilization.

2 Presentation

A University Community Hour has the following advantages:

- Builds a sense of community, as student groups and departments congregate together in the center of the university at a time when faculty are present

- Provides an additional 75-minute option (desired by some faculty)

- Promotes undergraduate classes ending before 4:00 p.m.

- Scheduling of the Community Hour allows events involving food options

3 Implementation

To accomplish prohibition of classes on Fridays from 12:30-1:45, class times were re-scheduled as follows:

MWF 12:30-1:20 becomes MW 12:30-1:45
MWF 1:30-2:20 becomes MWF 2:00-2:50
MWF 2:30-3:20 becomes MWF 3:00-3:50
MWF 3:30-4:20 becomes MW 12:30-1:45 or
MWF 3:00-3:50 or early a.m.

4 Long-term Survival

The University Community Hour was well-received by faculty, staff, and students, and is expected to continue.

Visit our website www.msanational.org/matf/holidayguide for access to Islamic Holidays Supplement C: Case Western "University Community Hour" documents

University of Toronto Accommodates Eid!

The University of Toronto provost's office issued the following memo in 2002, making a commitment to accommodate Eid when scheduling exams, tests, and other academic activities, such as labs:

"It is assumed that every effort will be made to avoid tests, examinations or other compulsory activities at these times. If compulsory activities are unavoidable, every opportunity should be given to these students to make up work that they miss, particularly in courses involving laboratory work. When the scheduling of tests or examinations cannot be avoided, students should be informed of the procedure to be followed to arrange to write at an alternate time."

Resources/Contacts

To establish contact with a MATF Consultant who specializes in Islamic holidays on campus, send an e-mail to matfholidays@msa-National.org. Your MATF Consultant will work with you to provide the following services as appropriate:

- Phone / e-mail consultation
- Letter of Support from MSA National
- List of campuses with holiday recognition on MSA National letterhead
- Research Assistance
- Proposal Comment and Review

The following sites project Islamic holiday dates. We suggest consulting with scholars and the local community before deciding which dates to use.
http://moonsighting.com/calendar.html,
http://www.islamicfinder.org

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