

Sat Sri Akal

My name is Simran Kaur-Colbert and I am a Sikh American graduate student at Miami University. I am proud to say I graduate with my PhD in Educational Leadership next Friday December 9th. At Miami University I served as the faculty advisor to the Sikh Student Association. The Sikh Student Association was founded by undergraduate student Ms. Navkiran Chima in the Fall of 2019. I've had the privilege of serving undergraduate students dedicated to the code of Love and Honor and to the values of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access. Among these students includes the first Sikh and South Asian American woman elected to be student body president, Ms. Amitoj Kaur. Prior to the school year 2020-2021 there were no Sikh religious holidays on the University's religious holiday and observances calendar. Sikh American and International students would often have to navigate the hardships and difficulty of asking for accommodations for their and our religious and spiritual beliefs or refrain altogether from seeking them. I'm proud to say that part of my advocacy as a graduate student included developing a non-exhaustive list of major religious holidays or festivals that are now readily accessible at the institutional level online, including Sikh religious holy days and observances: Gurupurab of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Guru Gobind Singh Ji, Vaisakhi, Bandhi Chhor Divas, and Holla Mohalla.

My undergraduate students and I have often been in conversations where we must justify and explain the need for why our tests, presentations, exams required accommodation. I have even been on the receiving end of retaliation in the classroom learning environment for simply discussing my Sikh articles of faith and religious observances and bigoted faculty weaponized my deeply held religious views to abuse their power and authority in exploiting implicit biases that racialized religious minorities such as Punjabi Sikh Americans in colleges across our country and in the state of Ohio regularly overcome and navigate in order to be successful and graduate.

HB 353 is a uniform law requiring "course instructors to accept without question the sincerity of a student's religious or spiritual belief system" and this is something that is much needed by religious and spiritual students in higher education. Further the aspect that an instructor shall keep requests for alternative accommodations confidential hedges concerns that a faculty member might abuse their authority to exploit any implicit biases they might have towards religious minority students such as Sikh Americans, and for instance, contact campus police to investigate us as terroristic threats for simply explaining the ritual of Amrit Sanchar for the Sikh religious holiday of Vaisakhi in class. That students who follow in my and the Sikh Student Association member's footsteps know that there is a uniform law that requires faculty to schedule a time and date for an alternative examination and to do so without prejudicial effect is a great comfort. It makes Ohio colleges and universities more inclusive of their increasingly religious and spiritual diverse student body.

Every student in Ohio higher education institutions should have this base level of protection and not make a choice between their faith and their education without the fear of retaliation. I'm proud to say that institutions such as my soon to be alma mater, Miami University, are already taking the steps to develop a non-exhaustive list of religious and spiritual observances and festivals. With this said, I encourage the committee to support the passage of this bill favorably in the General Assembly. Thank you. Waheguruji ka Khalsa, Waheguruji ki Fateh.