

PROPONENT TESTIMONY OF:

Khalid Dada

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IN SUPPORT OF:

HB 353: Enact The Testing Your Faith Act

Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

[Columbus, OH, 11/30/22] — Dear Chair Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education committee. My name is Khalid Dada, and I am the President of the Muslim Students' Association at the Ohio State University, otherwise known as MSA-OSU. Thank you for the opportunity to testify to House Bill 353 and thank you to Representative Click and Representative Miranda for sponsoring this important legislation.

As the MSA's current president at The Ohio State University, the largest chapter in the nation, I have devoted my time to serving Islam and the university's Muslim students by enhancing the campus environment, educating Muslims and people of other faiths about Islam, and strengthening the community through service and advocacy. I've had the chance to learn about a diverse range of religious and cultural customs through my work with MSA through coordinating and participating in a number of interfaith gatherings and discussions with various organizations.

Upon discovering my passion for politics and public service, I joined the Undergraduate Student Government (USG) to enable the university in attaining justice for all of its students. This year, I was appointed to serve as a University Senator, placing me at the pinnacle of the university's administrative system with the authority to promote reform. I have a unique viewpoint on how to convey the narrative of the religiously observant student because of my engagement in both MSA and USG. I voiced my concerns for students who practice Islam and other faiths at the highest levels of our university's governing system.

Over the past two years I have advocated strongly alongside a group of students to draft a resolution that supports students who are observing a religious obligation in the classroom by enhancing the attendance policy. With Ohio State ranking among the top three most populous universities in the country, it's critical for our university to serve as a platform and a base for other colleges. The request is straightforward and clear: to permit students who miss class because of religious observances continue to be held accountable for their academic obligations during the period of the excused absence by providing them with reasonable alternatives and/or accommodations without consequence.

Anyone who has engaged in advocacy at a large public university should be aware of the bureaucratic obstacles faced by students who are fighting for their rights. It has been particularly shocking to hear the difficulties faced by religious students at Ohio State. This past year was the first time the holy month of Ramadan coincided with the school calendar and raised concerns about making adjustments for religious observances. Ramadan is a holy month during which Muslims are expected to fast from all food and drink from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims spend more time and energy on prayer and God-consciousness during this time, making it particularly difficult for students to balance both commitments emotionally, mentally, and physically.

As the President of the Muslim Students' Association it is common for students to address their concerns in the classroom with me. The amount of times during the month of Ramadan over the 2022 year that I received messages forwarded from professors that gave no exception to students in time to make up exams or extend deadlines in crucial moments of the semester was frightful. Imagine having to choose your education or faith in both of the most critical times to one or the other.

Since July of 2021, I have been meeting with university officials and other Ohio State students of all faiths to determine the best way to create a friendly environment for religious students without compromising their academics or religious obligations. Nearly 30 to 40 meetings later, we are still being pushed to the side with little to no explanation as to why this isn't a priority for our university.

I have discussed the importance of this legislation with professors, administrators, and faculty from nearly every department. We have received praise and encouragement to continue our advocacy, but there is no clear plan for how the university intends to provide an environment where students can continue to attain academic success while also practicing their faith.

As a leader in this position, I can speak from experience since I have made it my responsibility to make sure every student is heard and that their rights are upheld. I'm here today to urge the committee to report this bill favorably on behalf of all Ohio-based religiously committed students, not just Muslims. I appreciate your consideration.