

Proponent Testimony: HB 353 – Testing Your Faith Act
Senate Committee on Workforce & Higher Education
November 30, 2022 | Columbus, OH

Chairman Johnson, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Martin, and members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee:

My name is Sarah Livingston and I have been the Executive Director of Ohio University Hillel since 2019. I'm sharing testimony of a former student Zoe Felber (Class of '21) a current student who wishes to remain anonymous, and myself.

Zoe: During my first day of classes freshman year, a professor told me, in front of 200 other students, that I would receive zeroes on the quizzes that I would miss for the Jewish holidays. I was devastated and humiliated--was this what the "real" world was like? My parents taught me that defeat and submission were never answers though, and I went back and forth with my professor, the division of Diversity & Inclusion, and the President of Ohio University before I was exempted from the assignments. The following summer, anxiety gnawed on me as I thought about this happening to another Jewish student, or even myself, again. I knew my Hillel director had crafted a policy to protect students through the office of DE&I so armed with that knowledge and the memory of what I went through the year before, I reached out to the DE&I Department and the President of the University to draft a letter for all faculty, staff, and professors, which stated the dates and importance of the Jewish holidays. The letter recommended that teachers avoid scheduling important assignments for those days. At the time, these experiences were exhausting and draining but if I helped even one student avoid the pain and humiliation of fighting for their religious rights then it was worth it.

Student: On October 4th, 2022 I missed class (Environmental Interpretation) due to the fact that I was attending Yom Kippur services at Hillel at Ohio University. During the class I missed, there was a class trip to the Southeast Ohio History Center. I emailed my Professor on 10/3 about missing class for the holiday and did not hear back from him. When I checked my grades the following day, I noticed that my grade had dropped. At the end of the following class, I asked how I could get the points and he told me that in order to get the points I would need to go to the museum on my own time and then write a three page paper about what I saw. He then emailed me multiple complex questions to answer about the museum exhibits.

I spoke with my classmates and learned that no one else in class had to write a paper nor did they participate in any group discussion or a learning experience that would equate to a three page paper response. The following class I told my Professor that I felt that writing a three page paper was a little excessive due to the fact that my missing class was for religious reasons. I told him that I was happy to go to the museum and get a signature to prove I was there or write a short paragraph reflection on my favorite exhibit from the Center. He told me that he had the discretion to choose how and what he assigns for 'make-up' points. The assignment I was given is not equitable and the situation has made me feel targeted for my Judaism.

These student stories are just two of many students who I have supported throughout my tenure at Ohio university Hillel. Often communicating directly with professors and partnering with the office of diversity and inclusion we have crafted a policy that provides students excused absences and full accommodations on missed assignments or exams for religious holidays. Even with this policy in place these situations continue to arise every year. I am testifying in full support of House Bill 353 today requiring all Ohio State public institutions of higher education to adopt policies for religious accomodation. Legally protecting students from any discrimination based on religion and providing accomodations, by law, is a fantastic first step in preventing systemic antisemitism and helping our students find success as a very small minority withing the Ohio State Public University system.