

Isabel Meltzer

Proponent Testimony: HB 353 – Testing Your Faith Act
Ohio House of Representatives Committee on Higher Education & Career Readiness
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Hello. I'm Isabel Meltzer, a senior at the University of Cincinnati studying Biomedical Engineering. I currently stand as the President of the student board at Cincinnati Hillel. I come to UC from Connecticut and previously lived in New Jersey and New York: three states that have a denser Jewish population. I grew up in a conservative synagogue, regularly attending shabbat services. I would not consider myself highly religious; however, I consider myself an observant and cultural Jew.

Through my five years of undergraduate education, I've experienced many situations in which I would have appreciated more lenient religious accommodations at UC. Coming from the east coast, I was very used to not worrying about having school on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Those days were always scheduled off in the academic calendar to allow Jewish students to practice their religion without academic concerns. Ohio is much the opposite. Classes are still held, and religious observation is rarely accepted as an excuse for a missed class.

During my sophomore year at UC, I had an evening class twice a week. This course had mandatory attendance for class credit. Unfortunately, the Yom Kippur break fast that year happened while I was scheduled to be in class. During the first few weeks of school, I spoke to my professor about how I would need to miss class that day to attend the final Yom Kippur service and break my 25 hour fast. I was simply told "That's too bad. You'll lose an attendance point for skipping." Despite my attempt to explain that this was a religious observation, she refused to allow me to miss the class without grade repercussion.

During my senior year at UC, I had two classes during the day of Yom Kippur. These were more courses that required attendance in order to obtain class credit. Despite these professors' awareness of the holiday, I was required to attend class. One of these courses centered around the program Zero Hunger Zero Waste. Being required to sit through an hour and 20-minute course where the entire class discussion centered around food while I needed to fast was extremely uncomfortable.

A bill that would allow students to have 3 days of flexibility where we are able to get time off due to religious obligations and holidays would be extremely well utilized. These days would give students the comfort of knowing that they can continue to be a full-time student while maintaining our religious observations. Additionally, I believe that requiring students to let the professor know about these specific days within the first two weeks of the semester is extremely acceptable. This would give students the ability to build a relationship with the professor early on and also give the professors advance notice of when these particular dates are to avoid excessive homework, in class exams, and/or presentations. I wish this bill existed throughout my undergraduate experience, so I could have avoided needing to attend class on days where I would have preferred to be celebrating with Hillel or my family.