

To: The Elon University Calendar Committee

From: The Elon University Multifaith Strategic Planning Committee

Date: March 24, 2022

Subject: Issues to Consider for the Academic Calendar Regarding Religious Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Our Multifaith Strategic Planning Committee was charged by Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Aswani Volety and Vice President for Student Life Jon Dooley to advance several goals of the Boldly Elon strategic plan, including the university's objective to "strengthen support networks dedicated to the success of historically marginalized groups and increase representation from underrepresented groups." In line with that goal, we have been charged with developing a plan to "make Elon a more religiously diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus and community." One of the issues that our committee has studied is how adjustments to our academic calendar could support greater diversity, equity, and inclusivity at Elon. As the calendar committee convenes this spring to set the calendar for the 2023-2024 academic year, we write to share our recommendations and the larger context for those recommendations.

Our starting point for considering these issues is our awareness of the Christian privilege that shapes the present academic calendar at Elon and at most institutions of higher education in the United States.

The academic calendar is structured so that classes never meet, and university offices are closed, on the holidays that are most important to Christian members of the Elon community, namely Christmas and Easter. Classes, of course, meet on the holidays that are most important to Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i, and Jain members of our community. Moving towards greater equity requires considering whether holidays that are as significant as Christmas to members of our campus community should be treated similarly, at least when observed by a significant percentage of our student body.

Our committee has studied the policies of a number of university campuses that serve as aspirants when it comes to inclusive excellence and academic calendars. Decisions to cancel classes for at least one holiday observed by a non-Christian group have often been made with reference to the size of that group—for example, Connecticut College instituted its policy to cancel classes on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur when its Jewish student population reached 13%. Most US campuses that cancel classes for non-Christian religious/cultural holidays do so for Jewish holidays, owing to significant percentages of Jewish students at those institutions—some, such as Connecticut College, Oberlin College, Hampshire College, or Muhlenberg College cancel classes for Yom Kippur, while some institutions (e.g. Brandeis University, Binghamton University, Pace University, or the City University of New York) also cancel classes for other Jewish holidays. Pace University has also taken the step to cancel classes on a number of other holidays, including Diwali, Lunar New Year, and Eid Al-Adha. We expect that other peer and aspirant institutions that prioritize religious diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that have

significant percentages of students from other minoritized populations, will follow suit over the coming years.

We believe that Elon, given its commitment to religious diversity, equity, and inclusion, given the goals of the Boldly Elon strategic plan, and given the commitment in our mission statement to “mind, body, and spirit” and to “respect for human differences,” should be a leader on this issue.

Our survey of the Elon student body this fall revealed that while Christian students on campus were very likely to agree that they “belonged on campus without having to hide or change their religions/spiritual/secular identity,” students from minoritized religious groups were less likely to agree. When we asked students and employees how Elon could become more inclusive of people with diverse religious/spiritual/secular/ethical/cultural identities, the recommendation to adopt more inclusive and equitable policies for non-Christian holidays was the most common specific recommendation that we heard. For example, as one student wrote on their survey, Elon’s current policy “makes students feel like their holidays are not as valued as Christian holidays (as our school schedule is based around Christmas/Easter) and that they must pick between academics and their religion.” Students and employees noted that canceling classes on the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur would be especially valuable for supporting students, given the large percentage of Jewish students at Elon (13% of the Elon undergraduate population). As one faculty member wrote, “Navigating those 2 days early in the year always leads to inappropriate comments by faculty who don’t acknowledge the days and disparage those who feel they need to miss and by students who complain about unfairness that students can miss class. I teach mostly first year students and they never take off for the holiday because they are scared. This sets up an immediate negative experience that could be avoided.”

Elon recognizes religious holidays as excused student absences when a Religious Observance Notification Form (RONF) is submitted, and growing numbers of students submit these forms each year, especially for the holidays of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. In 2021-2022, 146 forms were submitted for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and 142 for Yom Kippur, well ahead of the next most observed holidays of Good Friday (59 requests) and the second day of Rosh Hashanah (48 requests). Jewish Life staff have conveyed to us that many first-year students who would like to have the days off for Rosh Hashanah and/or Yom Kippur have told them that they do not feel comfortable submitting these forms (in line with the comment quoted above), and that returning students are even less likely to submit these forms. We expect that the dynamics are similar for students committed to other religious traditions—though they are somewhat different for Christian students who, of course, never have to submit forms for Easter, the day after Easter, Christmas, or the days before and after Christmas.

We do not believe that classes should be canceled for every religious or cultural holiday observed by students on campus, but we do believe that once a minoritized group represents more than 8–10% of the undergraduate population at Elon, it makes sense to provide a day off for one holiday that is especially important to members of that group. We also believe there are good arguments for considering a number lower than 8%, following the model used at Pace University, in order to better support a more religiously diverse and inclusive community. At the current time, however, Jewish students are the only non-Christian religious group that represents

more than 1% of the Elon student population, and although we hope to increase the population of many other groups in the coming years, the time has not come to consider canceling classes for Diwali or Eid Al-Adha. But as 13% of Elon undergraduates identify as Jewish, according to Truitt Center data, we recommend adding one Jewish holiday as a day off on the academic calendar, at least for the 2023-2024 academic year. While Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah may be of roughly equal popularity according to RONF data, the models provided by other institutions and the recommendation of Jewish Life staff at Elon is to designate Yom Kippur, widely perceived as the holiest of Jewish holidays, as the day off in 2023-2024.

It seems especially compelling to us to make this move given that this would cause no serious disruption to the academic calendar. And we imagine that the day could also feature other Truitt Center programming for the broader student body, or serve as a kind of “wellness day” for all students regardless of identity, as one respondent to our survey suggested.

We acknowledge that canceling classes on only one Jewish holiday—Yom Kippur—falls far short of what some Jewish students and staff members have recommended, which is to also cancel classes on Rosh Hashanah. We note that more traditionally observant Jewish students will continue to miss up to 12 other days of class each academic year (two days of Rosh Hashanah, two days at the start of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah, and four days of Passover, and two days of Shavuot when Shavuot falls in May). But we think that canceling classes on one of the thirteen Jewish holidays on which work is traditionally prohibited is the right step at this time.

What should be the status of Easter Monday, which has long been a day on which classes are canceled at Elon? It is not clear to us how large the constituency is at Elon that attaches significant importance to Easter Monday—in the surveys and listening sessions we have conducted, we have not heard many voices speak up in favor of retaining it. (We also think that Good Friday may be a more significant day to many members of the Elon community, although the number of students submitting RONFs for Good Friday is not especially high and has been on the decline in recent years—with the exception of 2019, when there was a one-year spike in notifications for Good Friday.) We are inclined to think that never having classes on Easter Sunday, or on Christmas, or on any of the days surrounding Christmas, sufficiently honors holy days that are of particular significance to Christian students at Elon, and that there is no need for canceling classes on Easter Monday as well; on the other hand, we are also comfortable with leaving Easter Monday on the calendar for the 2023-2024 year—or with replacing it with Good Friday.

In any case, though, removing Easter Monday from the academic calendar would not by itself create the kind of equity and inclusivity that we seek to advance at Elon. So long as Elon is committed to closing the university on the major Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter themselves, we should be canceling classes for at least one major holiday of other groups that make up a sizable percentage of the Elon student population. Therefore, our key recommendation at this time is to add Yom Kippur as a day off on the university calendar in 2023-2024.