

USAC Proposal for Days of Significance Observance

Overview

The Culture Initiatives Committee (CIC) of the University Staff Advisory Council (USAC) proposes an enhancement to the current Leave Policy by adding three (3) Days of Significance to be used at each employee's discretion. This addendum will allow employees to observe holidays and celebrations not included in our current calendar. By incorporating these additional days, our university will align more closely with peer institutions and strengthen its competitiveness in attracting and retaining top talent.

Objective & Rationale

The USAC CIC proposes three (3) additional days off for university employees. These days would be typified as Days of Significance. These days would be offered in addition to the current Paid Time Off (PTO) structure. These Days of Significance would be used at the employee's discretion to observe days of personal importance for each employee.

Historically, the University has championed and passed recommendations from USAC and the CIC for the following initiatives: [Martin Luther King, Jr. Day \(2021\)](#)¹, [parental leave \(2022\)](#)², and [Juneteenth Holiday \(2023\)](#)³. The University's relationship with USAC and the CIC with respect to identifying and meeting staff needs has historically been a strong and respected one; supporting this recommendation would be a continuation of this thriving working relationship.

The three (3) Days of Significance would increase the University's competitiveness as a top employer and increase current and future employees' sense of belonging. When examining the policies of local academic institutions, peer academic institutions, and local and national employers of choice, most organizations offer personal or floating holidays as part of a robust PTO structure. Table 1 indicates an average allocation of 2.44 days across organizations who offer floating or personal days to staff.

An analysis of the comprehensive leave structure⁴ of these same organizations shows that on average, these organizations offer 45.58 days of paid leave to full-time, benefits eligible, exempt staff in their first year of employment. This is a difference of more than 7 days of paid leave in comparison to the 38 days offered to full-time, benefits eligible, exempt staff in their first year of employment at Vanderbilt University (VU) (See Table 2).

To remain competitive within the employer market and to mirror the policies of our peers, the USAC CIC proposes an allotment of three (3) days to be used as Days of Significance in conjunction with the current PTO policy. Compared to industry employers with higher salary offerings, allotting Days of Significance would provide supplemental forms of compensation for current and future employees. A flexible Days of Significance policy would ensure staff could select to take time away from work on days which are meaningful for them.

Additionally, incorporating a dynamic PTO structure [leads to greater retention, increased morale, and staff experiencing greater feelings of belonging](#)⁵. Current staff members share this sentiment, one employee stated this policy change "**would improve VU's reputation as employees talk to the community about how VU supports their culture or religion or other significant aspects of life. Additionally, it would boost my personal opinion of my employer, an employer who cares about what is best for their employees.**"⁶

Amplifying the Staff Voice

The University currently provides holiday leave for US federal holidays and days which align with the Christian faith. As we aim to compete globally and attract global talent, the Days of Significance would ensure employees who come to Vanderbilt from international locales have resources to celebrate culturally relevant days. This change would also provide employees of all faiths with an opportunity to celebrate important holidays without adversely impacting their PTO. Representatives from the Jewish Employee Affinity Group (Appendix B) and the Muslim Faculty and Staff Association (Appendix C) have shared reflections and letters of support highlighting their communities' support for this proposal.

This change would provide greater consideration for staff whose cultural or religious celebrations align with the lunar calendar. Unlike staff whose cultural or religious celebrations are on the same day each calendar year; communities whose celebrations align with the lunar calendar vary from year to year. This creates challenges with consistency in work schedules that is afforded to staff whose days of significance do not fluctuate annually. Although the University does currently have means for [requesting religious accommodations](#) ⁷ the process for determining the outcome of these requests is not readily accessible. This process also does not guarantee time away from work will be provided. In these instances, employees must either use PTO or forego a significant religious celebration.

The Vanderbilt community includes members whose individual connections to country, community, and culture expand beyond the current observations in our holiday calendar. In support of this proposal, we polled members of our community to gain an intimate understanding of their individually held days of significance. Upon completion of this survey, we gained the following insights:

- 66% of participants celebrate cultural, religious, or other significant days that are not recognized by the university calendar.
- 84% use paid time off to celebrate days that are not recognized by the university calendar ⁸
- 92% have worked on cultural, religious, or significant days they celebrate that are not recognized by the university calendar to preserve paid time off ⁸

The survey instrument in conjunction with supplemental video interviews offered staff an opportunity to provide a deeper, qualitative understanding of why they supported this proposal and how they believed it would positively impact the Vanderbilt community. Throughout conversations with staff, there were commonly shared views about the importance of this policy.

Many staff spoke to the positive impact this change would have on morale across the institution. There was also a frequent expression of how this change would highlight and celebrate the existence of our multicultural community. One staff member shared that ***“having the autonomy to observe these days without the need to explain or justify their significance would alleviate a subtle pressure that comes from feeling “outside” of the institutional norm.”*** ⁶

Another commonly shared theme was how this change would mirror policies and resources currently in place for students and faculty that do not presently exist for staff. One community member stated, ***“My office works with various campus partners to create the Holy Days calendar and provide religious accommodations for students. I appreciate this work being done for students, and I'm sure it has a positive impact on many. However, that same courtesy is not given to staff, despite the big push for belonging at Vanderbilt.”*** ⁶

The implementation of (3) Days of Significance would create a pathway to a greater sense of belonging for all. Belonging is one of the [Office of People, Culture and Belonging's tenants](#) ⁹: “Our team is at the heart of Vanderbilt's commitment to nurturing a community where every individual's journey is valued”. The Days of Significance would further underscore Vanderbilt's belief that all people belong by providing time off to observe and celebrate cultural, religious, and personal days of importance.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, time away from work to celebrate days of significance and be present with loved ones held a deeper meaning for staff. PTO requests for days aligned with significant cultural and religious celebrations increased by more than 25% from 2020 to 2021 (Graph 1). Time is an invaluable resource and VU staff have shown a deep understanding of this by significantly increasing the time they take away from work in recent years. This trend has continued and has been maintained in subsequent years despite a staff growth of only 6% (Graph 2).

Currently, staff who celebrate days of significance that are not observed by our current university calendar experience less flexibility and autonomy than staff whose celebrations are reflected in our calendar. Those who choose to celebrate have less PTO for potential illnesses or familial priorities which may arise than their counterparts whose days of significance align with the observances in our university calendar.

Conclusion

Vanderbilt University is a global campus and community attracting promising talent worldwide. Yet our current holiday schedule aligns almost exclusively with the US calendar and provides access to time away from work for those who align with the Christian faith. Team members with strong ties to holidays and celebrations outside this calendar must use personal time to commemorate these occasions or choose to forego observing these days of significance.

An allotment of (3) Days of Significance would create an opportunity for members of the Vanderbilt community to celebrate cultural, religious, and personal days of significance without adversely impacting their PTO balance. This change aligns closely with the appointment of our new [Vice Chancellor of People, Culture, & Belonging -Sydney Savion](#)¹⁰, and Vanderbilt's expressed commitment to "... fostering an environment where each person can thrive professionally and personally".

This change would provide tangible evidence of the university's commitment to ensure every member of our community knows, feels, and believes they belong. Implementing this policy will also ensure we remain competitive with peer institutions across the country as well as local institutions and other employers of choice in Nashville. Vanderbilt is renowned globally for our commitment to excellence. By strengthening our current leave policy by adding days of significance we will not only further showcase our commitment to belonging; we will also set a precedent and example for others to follow.

-
1. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2020/10/23/vanderbilt-university-to-mark-mlk-day-as-staff-holiday-starting-in-2021/>
 2. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2022/08/24/hr-shares-updates-on-vanderbilts-expanded-paid-parental-leave-for-staff/>
 3. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2023/05/17/vanderbilt-to-observe-juneteenth-with-paid-staff-holiday/#:~:text=Vanderbilt%20University%20will%20recognize%20Juneteenth,hold%20classes%20on%20une%2019.>
 4. An organization's comprehensive leave structure includes a combination of any of the following: paid accrued vacation leave, paid accrued sick time, paid holidays, paid winter break, paid personal days, and paid floating holidays.
 5. <https://www.aseonline.org/News-Events/ASE-News/EverythingPeople-This-Week/floating-holidays-a-win-win-benefit>
 6. Statement sourced, in whole or in part, from staff who completed the Days of Significance Testimonial Form.
 7. https://vanderbilt.guardianconduct.com/incident-reporting?incident_type=Religious%20Accommodation
 8. Percentages are in reference to staff who celebrate cultural, religious, or other significant days that are not recognized by the university calendar.
 9. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/pcb/>
 10. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2023/12/14/sydney-savion-named-vanderbilts-inaugural-vice-chancellor-for-people-culture-and-belonging/>

TABLE 1

| Analysis of Floating Holiday or Personal Day Policy | | | |
|---|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Organization | Relationship | Days Offered | Source |
| Amazon* | Local Competitor | 6 | Link |
| American Baptist College | TN Institution | 0 | Link |
| Austin Peay State University | TN Institution | 0 | Link |
| Belmont University | TN Institution | 2 | Link |
| Blue Cross Blue Shield of TN* | Top TN Employer | 1 | Link |
| Boston University | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| Brandeis University | Peer Institution | 5 | Link |
| Cal. Institute of Technology | Peer Institution | 1 | Link |
| Carnegie Mellon University | Peer Institution | 3 | Link |
| Case Western University* | Peer Institution | 1 | Link |
| Cumberland University | TN Institution | 2 | Link |
| Delta Airlines* | Top National Employer | 7 | Link |
| Duke University | Peer Institution | 3 | Link |
| Emory University | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| Emory University | Top National Employer | 2 | Link |
| Fisk University | TN Institution | 3 | Link |
| Harvard University | Peer Institution | 3 | Link |
| Johns Hopkins | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| Mass Institute of Technology | Peer Institution | 0 | Link |
| Middle Tennessee State University | TN Institution | 0 | Link |
| New York University | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| Northwestern Medicine | Top National Employer | 1 | Link |
| Northwestern University | Peer Institution | 3 | Link |
| Rice University | Peer Institution | 0 | Link |
| Stanford University | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| Tennessee State University | TN Institution | 0 | Link |
| Tulane University | Peer Institution | 1 | Link |
| U. of Southern California | Peer Institution | 1 | Link |
| U. Penn System | Peer Institution | 0 | Link |
| University of California San Diego | Top National Employer | 1 | Link |
| University of Chicago | Peer Institution | 2 | Link |
| University of Michigan | Top National Employer | 3 | Link |
| University of Rochester* | Peer Institution | 0 | Link |
| University of TN System | TN Institution | 0 | Link |
| Wash U. (St. Louis) | Peer Institution | 0 | Link |
| | Vanderbilt University | 0 | |

* Indicates an organization or institution whose comprehensive leave policy is not accessible to external entities and is not included in Table 2.

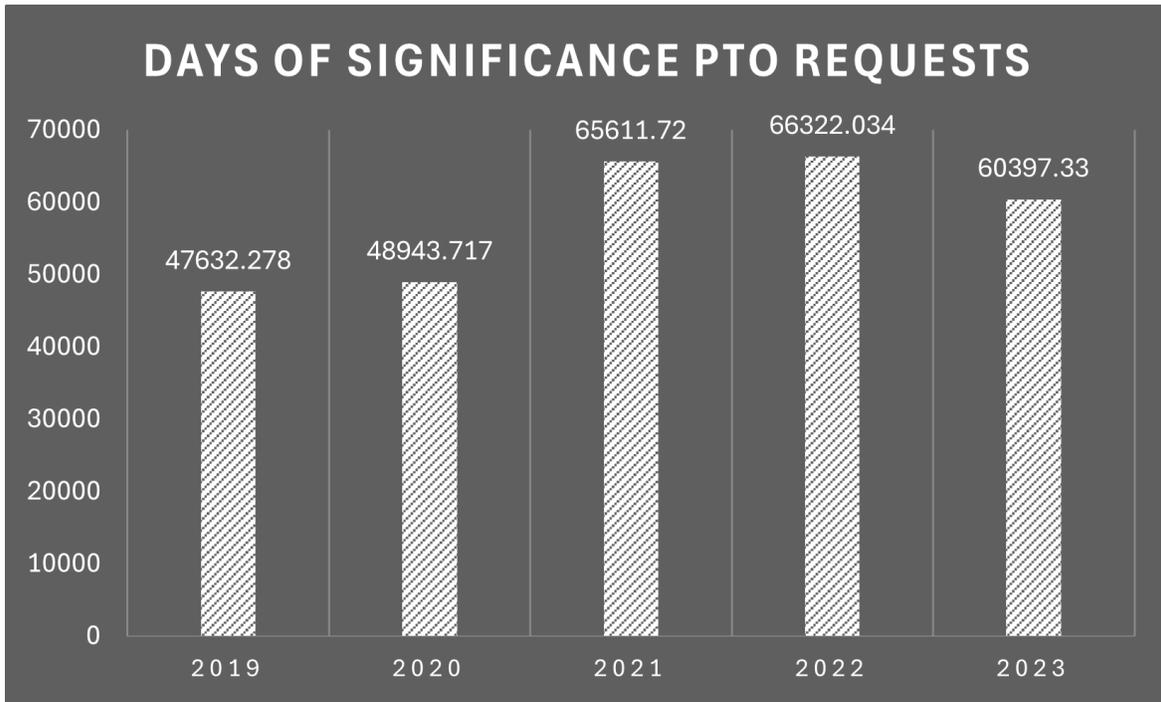
TABLE 2

| Analysis of Comprehensive Leave Policy | | | |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Institution | Relationship | Total Leave Days | Floating or Personal Days |
| American Baptist College | TN Institution | 35 | No |
| Austin Peay State University | TN Institution | 53 | No |
| Belmont University | TN Institution | 38 | Yes |
| Boston University | Peer Institution | 61 | Yes |
| Brandeis University | Peer Institution | 51 | Yes |
| Cal. Institute of Technology | Peer Institution | 43 | Yes |
| Carnegie Mellon University | Peer Institution | 40 | Yes |
| Cumberland University** | TN Institution | 39 | Yes |
| Duke University | Peer Institution | 56 | Yes |
| Emory University | Peer Institution | 40 | Yes |
| Fisk University | TN Institution | 45 | Yes |
| Harvard University | Peer Institution | 52 | Yes |
| Johns Hopkins* | Peer Institution | 40 | Yes |
| Mass Institute of Technology* | Peer Institution | 52 | No |
| Middle Tennessee State University** | TN Institution | 50 | No |
| Northwestern Medicine | Peer Institution | 38 | Yes |
| Northwestern University | Peer Institution | 48 | Yes |
| New York University | Peer Institution | 52 | Yes |
| Ohio State University (Columbus) | Top National Employer | 38 | No |
| Rice University | Peer Institution | 37 | No |
| Stanford University | Peer Institution | 39 | Yes |
| Tennessee State University | TN Institution | 50 | No |
| Tulane University | Peer Institution | 40 | Yes |
| University of Kentucky | Top National Employer | 41 | No |
| University of Memphis** | TN Institution | 50 | No |
| University of Michigan | Top National Employer | 51 | Yes |
| University of TN – Chattanooga** | TN Institution | 52 | No |
| University of TN - Health Sciences Center** | TN Institution | 52 | No |
| University of TN – Knoxville** | TN Institution | 52 | No |
| U. Penn* | Peer Institution | 45 | No |
| University of California San Diego | Top National Employer | 50 | Yes |
| University of Chicago | Peer Institution | 40 | Yes |
| U. of Southern California | Peer Institution | 38 | Yes |
| Wash U. (St. Louis) * | Peer Institution | 42 | No |
| Vanderbilt University | | 38 | No |

* Indicates an institution that is also in the top 100 National Employers

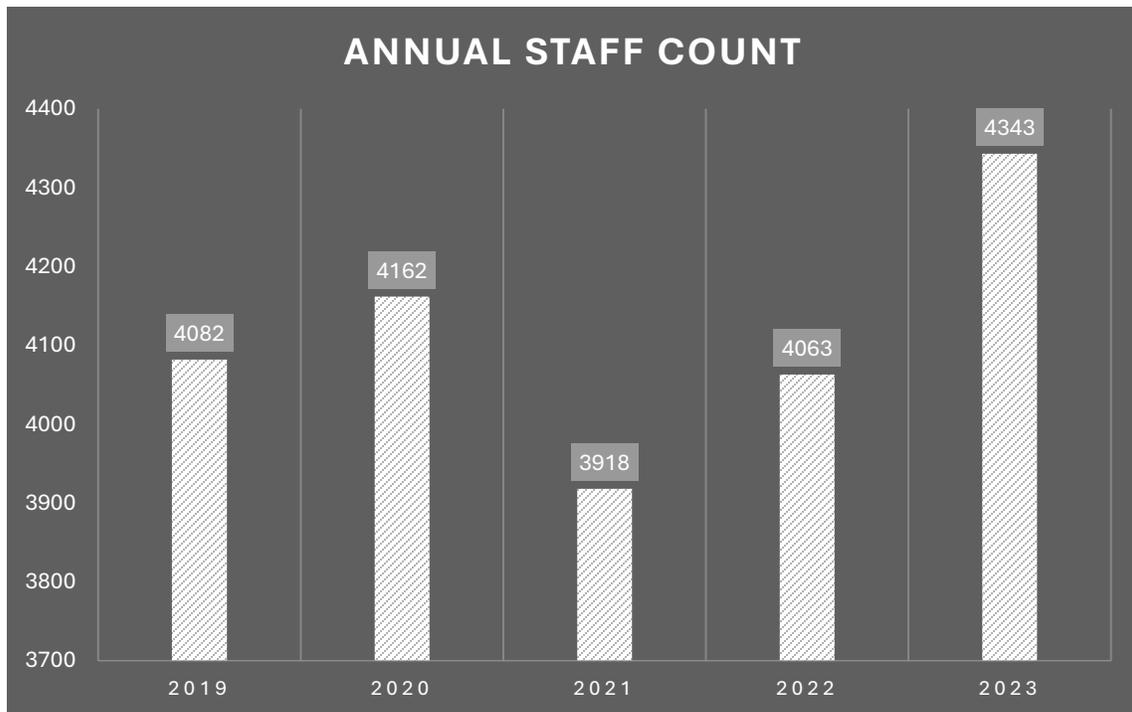
** Indicates an institution that is also a top Tennessee Employer

Graph 1



This graph shows the total number of PTO hours employees requested on days which are considered significant across communities. These days were sourced from the Center for Spiritual & Religious Life's High Holy Days calendars.

Graph 2



This graph shows the total number of staff employed by the university on January 1 of each calendar year.

Appendix A

Implementation Recommendations for Days of Significance Policy

We understand that the changes proposed in this document will have organizational and operational impact across the university. We have given great consideration to how this change would affect not only staff members but the organization as well. We have outlined implementation recommendations below that we hope will aid in incorporating this policy. We defer to university leadership on best practices but wanted to demonstrate our deep understanding of this multi-layered change and seek to make implementation as seamless as possible.

Infrastructure Recommendations

1. **Develop and distribute a foundational Days of Significance Calendar.** This calendar can align with the Center for Spiritual & Religious Life's Holy Days Calendar. This will provide a baseline level of awareness of significant days celebrated across communities.
2. **Develop and implement a communication strategy which encompasses a rollout and maintenance plan.** If implemented, we anticipate communication will be disseminated throughout the organization. We believe it is imperative to share information about this change using a regular cadence (annually) to ensure all staff are informed and aware of the policy.
3. **Provide training and support to people leaders.** Supportive leadership is essential to empower staff to utilize Days of Significance. However, it is imperative that we take a proactive stance to ensure all leaders are equipped to provide support in these conversations. This recommendation is geared towards aligning with the university's commitments to belonging and to developing and upskilling employees at every level of the institution. Creating development resources in this area will empower our leaders to support team members who utilize the benefits of this policy.

Guidelines for Using Days of Significance

1. Days of Significance do not roll over from year to year and must be used within the fiscal year they are granted. Staff should schedule to use their allotted Days of Significance by June 15th of each fiscal year. Days of Significance which have not been earmarked for use by this date will be forfeited.
2. Employees will not be required to disclose why they are using their Days of Significance.
3. Staff will be permitted to use these Days of Significance by employing the same policies and parameters outlined for PTO.
4. Staff whose employment is voluntarily or involuntarily terminated who have unused Days of Significance will not receive a payout for these days.
5. The allotment schedule for Days of Significance will align with the fiscal year calendar.
 - Proposed Allotment Schedule
 - All (3) Days Accessible July 1 if Already Employed
 - Start Between July 1 and October 31 – 3 Days
 - Start Between November 1 – January 31 – 2 Days
 - Start February 1 – May 31 – 1 Day
 - Start June 1 – June 30 – 0 Days
 - The proposed allotment schedule provides access to paid leave for staff beginning employment with the university who do not have access to accrued paid leave. This ensures staff can take time away from work for personally significant events at any stage of their career journey.

Appendix B

Letter of Support from the Jewish Employee Affinity Group

To the Vanderbilt University administration,

As members of the Jewish Employee Affinity Group Leadership Board, we are writing to express our strong support for the proposed “Days of Significance” policy. This policy, which would allow staff to take paid time off for days of religious or cultural significance without tapping into their existing PTO bank, is a critical step toward fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace at Vanderbilt University.

As a university, we provide resources and support for religious accommodations for our students, so they can have the time and space to observe their holy days. If faculty need to take time off for the same reason, they can cancel class with no issue. We strongly believe this policy will provide the same support to staff.

Staff of a minority religion face a recurring challenge that colleagues may not experience: the need to use PTO for observances that are deeply important to their faith and culture. Jewish staff, for example, often must use PTO for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover—holidays that hold immense spiritual significance. At an institution that prides itself on promoting a culture of belonging, this can feel at odds with our desire to fully participate in the community while honoring our faith traditions.

The current policy requires some staff to choose between celebrating their most sacred holidays and using their PTO for other necessary purposes such as illness, vacation, childcare, or personal time. This burden disproportionately impacts those of us from minority religious or cultural backgrounds, creating a sense of exclusion.

Moreover, under the federal guidelines, Christian employees largely benefit from holidays like Christmas and Easter being covered by the academic calendar or falling on weekends. By contrast, our holidays, and many of our minority-religion colleagues, follow the lunar calendar. This causes the dates to shift year by year, and those of us who observe these holidays are forced to navigate the system at a disadvantage.

We believe this addition to the leave policy would demonstrate Vanderbilt’s commitment to inclusivity and belonging for all employees, leveling the playing field, and honoring the diverse identities within our community. It would also distinguish Vanderbilt as a forward-thinking employer who not only talks about belonging and inclusion but acts on those values in meaningful ways.

Thank you for considering this policy change. We strongly believe it will have a positive and lasting impact on the Vanderbilt community and contribute to making it a place where all employees feel respected and valued for who they are.

Sincerely,
Vanderbilt Jewish Employee Affinity Group Leadership Board

Emma Duncliffe
Elizabeth Flier
Emily Ritchart
Amy Smith

Appendix C
Letter of Support from the Muslim Staff and Faculty Association

To Whom It May Concern:

We are writing to convey our deep support for the proposed “Days of Significance” policy, which would allow employees to take paid leave for religious or cultural observances without depleting their accrued personal time off (PTO). As members of the Muslim Staff and Faculty Association (MSAFA), we believe this policy would help foster a greater sense of belonging for our community and create a more equitable and inclusive workplace for all.

As Muslims, we must regularly use our PTO to be able to celebrate our religious holidays, unlike other members of the Vanderbilt community. For example, Christian staff often benefit from national holidays like Christmas and Easter, which are recognized by the academic calendar and embedded into existing time off schedules. As such, there is no need to take PTO to observe those holidays.

For Muslim staff members, in particular, sacred holidays such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are essential times for spiritual reflection, community engagement, and family celebration. Currently, however, we are often required to use PTO to observe these days, which forces us to make difficult decisions between honoring our faith traditions or reserving time off for other needs such as illness, child or elder care, or rest. This is true for other religious minority groups as well.

This disparity underscores the need for Vanderbilt to adopt a more equitable and inclusive approach. We believe that implementing a policy for paid leave on religious or cultural days of significance would affirm the university’s commitment to fostering an environment where all employees feel they truly belong. It would allow employees to honor their identities and religious practices without sacrificing essential PTO, creating a more balanced and respectful workplace for everyone.

We appreciate your consideration of this important proposal. We believe its adoption would have a lasting positive impact on the entire university community, making Vanderbilt a place where all employees, regardless of faith or background, feel valued and respected.

Sincerely,

Vanderbilt Muslim Staff and Faculty Association Leadership