

DAC Newsletter:

Policies and Spaces Supporting Religious Minorities on our Campus

One of the populations that DAC strives to support is our religious minorities on campus. In this week's Newsletter, **Kulsum Shaikh, Student Representative on DAC**, reflects on the work she has done to create a campus climate that is more welcoming to those members of our community who practice a faith other than Catholicism.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to serve on the Diversity Action Committee as a student representative this past year. DAC's goals and values line up with my personal goals and values, one of which is to make this campus a better place than how I found it when I first came here, by specifically creating a more welcoming atmosphere for the religious minorities on campus. I am proud to say there were a few initiatives I was able to spearhead so far in my academic career here at Siena. DAC has given me a place to highlight some of these initiatives, which hopefully every Siena college student, faculty and staff member will be able to take advantage of in the future.



Till this past semester, Siena College did not have any type of religious holiday exemption policy, a policy that would allow students of non-Catholic affiliation to be able to have an official excused religious holiday absence for holidays which are not included in the college-wide holidays where the college is closed. I brought up the need of having this policy to the Student Senate the second semester of my freshmen year. Student Senate then assigned the task of creating this policy to their Academics committee. Serving on the committee, the committee members and I were able to craft a religious exemption policy. There were hurdles along the way, but after passing through these hurdles, the policy finally reached the table of the Board of Instruction, and was passed at the beginning of this semester. The policy is now in effect, and will be included in future Siena College catalogs, allowing students to have an official letter written by the office of Academic Affairs, which will then be sent to all of the student's instructors, notifying them of the student's absence for the particular religious holiday.

This policy will not only allow students to feel more comfortable being absent for their religious holiday, but will also provide the student an official exemption from the school, rather than leaving it up to the discretion of the professor whether or not the student will be held accountable according to the professor's attendance policy.

Another initiative that I was passionate about was having some type of inter-faith prayer space here on campus. Being a commuter student, I often end up needing a place to perform my daily prayers, therefore I use the chapel located in the Sarazen Student Union. There are many students, however, who do not feel comfortable utilizing this space, and who would feel more comfortable praying in a space that has no religious affiliation. Sitting as a student representative on the Sarazen Student Union Renovation Committee last semester, I brought up the need to have an interfaith space in the renovated building. The suggestion was taken seriously by both the faculty and administrators sitting on the committee, and therefore, a space which will serve as an interfaith room was set aside in the official renovation plan. This space will be located where the student leadership lounge is currently located in the union.

The Diversity Action Committee is currently working on trying to create an interfaith academic calendar which will have all of the religious holidays listed on it, so that all students, faculty, and staff are aware of when the holidays are. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to work towards creating a better campus, and to have the support of the Diversity Action Committee to further carry out positive change.