

Guidelines Regarding Religious Symbols, Decorations, and Displays

The First Amendment protects the rights of individuals to freedom of religion and the right to freely express their religious beliefs through speech and symbols. However, the First Amendment also prohibits public institutions like state universities from endorsing religion, or non-religion, or favoring one religion over another.

As a result the University should protect the right of individuals to celebrate religious holidays by decorating their personal space (e.g., residence hall rooms, desk tops), but the University should not promote or appear to promote religious observance or encourage official use of public property to promote religious displays -- except for educational purposes. In some cases a personal space may be a desk in a public space, but we should recognize that space as personal space. Religious displays in a public space outside or inside campus buildings should be sponsored by groups or individuals rather than the University. Moreover, the University will determine appropriate areas for any group to erect private displays of religious symbols for a limited time during religious holidays. Such displays must clearly identify the sponsor, explain the purpose and meaning of the display, and note that the display is not sponsored by the University. Religious displays will normally be placed in a public area for no more than two weeks and sponsors are responsible for removing them. Displays not meeting these criteria will be removed by the University at the sponsor's expense.

Any individual or organization wishing to place a private religious display in a public space on the grounds of the campus should complete a campus Land Use Request Form, which can be found online at <https://www.umass.edu/af-forms/physicalplant/landuse>. Such requests will be evaluated on the basis of criteria unrelated to content, such as the location of other displays and events, availability of electrical power, public safety concerns and so on.

Those responsible for implementing these guidelines should exercise sensitivity and care in interpreting them and in distinguishing between private expression and University sponsorship.