RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

Metropolitan Community College is a community whose members hold a variety of religious and philosophical views. As a public institution, we respect the separation of church and state as a constitutional principle and practice, as well as the free exercise of religion, and we also hold, as one of our core values, a commitment to “vigilantly protect free expression of thought.” The following will give guidance relative to such separation, exercise and protection, all of which may evolve in accord with law.

Institutionally-sponsored religious symbols are not appropriate in a public institution. We urge departments—employees to be respectful of our diversity of beliefs and refrain from displaying within public areas in the workplace any religious symbols that may be seen as implying institutional support for a particular religious viewpoint. Departments—Employees should also exercise good judgment and sensitivity concerning the appropriateness of seasonal, non-religious symbols in the workplace.

Our concern about the appearance of institutional support for a particular religious viewpoint must be balanced against our respect for the rights of individuals to express religious views in their personal dress and in their personal workplaces that are not located in public areas and do not suggest institutional support.

This policy distinguishes between public areas and personal workplaces. A public area includes any MCC property where members of the public may come to receive services or attend public events. Religious symbols should not be displayed in public spaces. As a public institution, MCC should not appear to support any particular religion.

Certain common areas within work units may also be public spaces. These are spaces that are shared by multiple employees in the performance of their jobs. Such areas would include break rooms, conference rooms, and reception areas within work units. Because these areas are shared, and are not personal workspaces, religious symbols are not appropriate in these spaces because they may cause discomfort to individual employees, students, or visitors who use that space but do not subscribe to that religion.
Personal workspaces are areas occupied by a single college employee and where the public generally does not enter. Private offices or cubicles, for example, may be personal workspaces. Individual employees may exercise their right to express their religious views and display religious symbols in their personal workspaces and in their personal dress. However, if members of the college community (students, faculty, administration or staff) regularly enter a private office to conduct college business, the occupant of that office must consider whether religious symbols might be viewed as implying college support for that religion. In addition, the occupant should consider that such a display may cause discomfort to individuals who enter their office to conduct college business. Good judgment will dictate whether religious symbols in a private office are appropriate given these considerations.

Any item that is linked to a particular religion is considered a religious symbol. For example, nativity sets, menorahs, the Star of David, a cross or crucifix, and images of Jesus, all would be considered to be religious symbols. Evergreen trees are not considered to be religious symbols, according to U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Therefore, evergreen trees in public areas are not prohibited by this policy. However, an evergreen tree displayed in a public area should not be decorated with religious symbols.

Other non-religious, seasonal items that may be used to decorate workspaces during the winter months include snowflakes, wreaths, garland, and lights. Please use good judgment in the use of such decorations.

Questions or issues concerning the matters encompassed by this policy should be addressed in the first instance to the Director of Employee Relations and Training.

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