



VIRGINIA CONFERENCE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

June 30, 2025

Rector Robert Hardie (outgoing)
Rector Rachel W. Sheridan (incoming)
Board of Visitors
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

Dear Rectors Hardie and Sheridan,

On behalf of the Virginia Conference of the American Association of University Professors (VA-AAUP), I write today to strongly condemn the federal Department of Justice (DOJ) for their politically motivated campaign that has just forced UVa President James Ryan to resign. VA-AAUP also calls for an investigation on what role, if any, members of UVa's Board of Visitors may have played in assisting the Department of Justice's vendetta against President Ryan.

The actions of the DOJ are clear violations of the independence and integrity of the University of Virginia as a free and open institution of research and learning. Even worse, this campaign represents nothing less than an extra-legal bid to impose federal control and President Trump's political ideology on American higher education itself.

Much like a free press, the health of American democracy depends upon the independence and integrity of its public and private universities. After all, the university is the place where scientific knowledge about the world is produced, circulated, and shared, and in order to produce valid and actionable knowledge, faculty and students must be free to follow the data where it leads without fear or favor. As scholars, in short, we must be free to pursue the truth, regardless of the opinions or ideologies of politicians, religious leaders, or other powerful social interests. This pursuit of truth becomes deeply corrupted when external actors or government officials try to impose their ideologies and values on the university or when they use their power and authority to bring campus leaders to heel.

Yet this is exactly what happened at the University of Virginia last week. The Trump administration has reportedly been unhappy with James Ryan's support for the bedrock values of academic freedom, shared governance, diversity, and equal access. According to press reports, Justice Department officials particularly disliked Ryan's focus on encouraging community service and felt that he had done too much to open the University of Virginia to more first-generation college students. Indeed, it seems that the Trump administration and the Justice Department want to wind back the clock and return the University of Virginia to a time when

racism, sexism, and homophobia went unchallenged and the benefits of higher education were limited to a privileged few.

To accomplish this goal, the Trump administration elected to use the full power of the U.S. government to force President Ryan's resignation. And what was their leverage? Despite the fact that the investigation of UVa was incomplete, the DOJ nonetheless threatened to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grant funding, including grants that fund UVa's life-saving medical and cancer research. It worked. Fearing what would happen to the university and the citizens of Virginia without this research funding, Ryan chose to resign. In sum, this was an illegitimate process with an appalling outcome.

VA-AAUP also would like to remind UVa's Board of Visitors that one of their most important duties is to *protect* the University and its leaders from external political interference. By no means should they support this interference or, even worse, execute the politically motivated orders of federal bureaucrats. Yet, according to the *New York Times*, it appears that, rather than serving the needs of students or the people of the Commonwealth, some members of the Board may have acted as if they were ground troops in a political chain of command that stretched from the Trump White House to Governor Youngkin and then to the Governor's appointees on UVa's Board.

Indeed, we have witnessed this political chain of command at work across multiple public universities in the Commonwealth, as many Youngkin-appointed Boards of Visitors have abandoned their responsibility to be wise stewards of their campuses in favor of executing the political orders of the Governor and Attorney General. Over the past year, we have seen unprecedented levels of Board overreach in the form of attempts to control curriculum, rewrite anti-discrimination policies, repress campus political speech, and to expand their power over the faculty tenure process. And now we must ask: did UVa's Board of Visitors participate in the Department of Justice's ideological vendetta against President Ryan?

If UVa Board members indeed assisted in Ryan's ouster, it would fit an established pattern of willful non-compliance on the part of the Governor and his Board appointees with regard to Virginia state law and the state constitution's separation of powers. For example, state law places our university governing boards under the control of the Virginia state legislature, not the executive. Yet there are currently eight Board members who continue to serve at three Virginia universities—including former state attorney general Ken Cuccinelli at UVa—even though their appointments were voted down by the Virginia Senate. This is worth repeating: *despite being rejected by the Senate last month, Mr. Cuccinelli and the other seven failed appointees have disregarded the law and have refused to step down*. This lawless behavior is currently the subject of a lawsuit brought by Virginia Senate leaders.

Let's be clear about this. Neither the United States Department of Justice nor the Governor of Virginia governs the University of Virginia. And while members of university governing boards are indeed appointed by the Governor, they serve under the authority of the General Assembly, and they take an oath to protect the integrity and advance the missions of Virginia's public

colleges and universities. In short, in Virginia's democratic system, a series of checks and balances exist to ensure that the Commonwealth's public universities enjoy independence from the political whims and machinations of local, state, and federal officials.

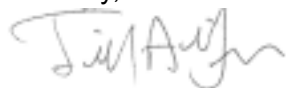
It is clear, however, that President Trump, Governor Youngkin, and many of Youngkin's board appointees want to bulldoze these checks and balances in order to exert ideological control over the Commonwealth's public colleges and universities.

We refuse to let them do so. We stand with the UVa Faculty Senate in condemning the actions of the U.S. Department of Justice, and we join with them in demanding an independent and public investigation into the circumstances and negotiations that led to Ryan's forced resignation.

On behalf of our members and all faculty across the Commonwealth, the Virginia Conference of the AAUP therefore strongly condemns the Trump administration's attack on the independence and integrity of the University of Virginia. We strongly condemn the Justice Department's decision to hold federal research funding hostage in order to oust UVa's president for political and ideological reasons. We reject the Justice Department's specious claims that President Ryan's administration was not in compliance with federal civil rights law. And we call on President Trump, the Justice Department, and Governor Youngkin to change course, to respect the independence and integrity of the University of Virginia, and to cease their larger effort to exert control over the governance and curriculum of American colleges and universities, both public and private.

We also call upon the Rector of UVa's Board and the Rectors of George Mason University and the Virginia Military Institute to follow the rule of law and refuse to seat any board member who was rejected by the Senate Privileges and Elections Committee. As Virginia Senator Surovell has made clear, these appointments have been rejected following the rules of the General Assembly. To ignore the law is to further erode the public's trust. Rectors of UVa, GMU, and VMI: now is the time to demonstrate your independence and uphold your commitments to the people of the Commonwealth. The integrity and reputation of public higher education in Virginia, and with it the future of democracy in the Commonwealth, demand nothing less.

Sincerely,



Dr. Timothy A. Gibson
President, Virginia Conference, American Association of University Professors (VA-AAUP)
Associate Professor, George Mason University

cc: Rector Charles "Cully" Stimson, George Mason University
BOV President Thomas E. Gottwald, Virginia Military Institute