VIRGINIA CONFERENCE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

The Virginia Conference of the American Association of University Professors condemns Trump administration attacks on George Mason University President Gregory Washington

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The Virginia Conference of the American Association of University Professors strongly condemns the Trump administration's hamfisted effort to undermine Dr. Gregory Washington by attacking and distorting his record as President of George Mason University. The investigations initiated by the Department of Justice and Education are baseless and the level of coordination between these federal agencies, conservative think tanks, and right-wing media make it clear that this is nothing more than a political hit job.

A month ago, the Trump administration succeeded in pressuring University of Virginia President James Ryan to resign–apparently because prominent alumni in the administration disliked his politics.[1] Now the administration is targeting GMU. Together with Governor Youngkin and his activist appointees to GMU's Board of Visitors (BOV), the Trump administration wants to exert direct political control over public higher education in Virginia. This is unacceptable. These actions threaten the integrity of our public universities, and we will oppose them with all our resources.

What a difference six years can make. When George Mason University President Gregory Washington was hired in 2019, he was greeted with unanimous enthusiasm from Mason's governing board. As former GOP lobbyist, BOV member, and search committee co-chair Jimmy Hazel put it at the time, "Dr. Washington brings the right mix of a strong academic and research-based background with demonstrated higher education leadership success." Then-Rector Tom Davis, a former Republican member of Congress, concurred, noting that Washington "showed tremendous vision for the future of our region and how we fit in, and demonstrated the ability to motivate and inspire our community. I look forward to working with him and seeing him position Mason as a leader in higher education."[2]

In the years since, President Washington has lived up to these high expectations. As a recent op-ed in *Virginia Business* described, "Mason's enrollment continues to grow even as many universities face declines. Its undergraduates are the most academically qualified in the university's history, with 25% of new first-year students earning a GPA of 4.0 or higher. Mason's rankings among public universities in *U.S. News* and the *Wall Street Journal* have risen

[1] In response to this coordinated ouster of President Ryan, the Faculty Senate at UVa has delivered a vote of no confidence to UVa's Board of Visitors, condemning the role the BOV played in facilitating this pressure campaign.
[2] As quoted in a recent Virginia Business op-ed.

considerably." Perhaps even more impressively, these gains have not reduced Mason's commitment to access and opportunity. Indeed, as the op-ed noted, "Mason is one of the few research-intensive (R1) universities to also be designated as a Carnegie Opportunity College and University."

Despite this record of success, the Departments of Justice and Education apparently want him out. To do so, they have conjured up two federal investigations filled with flimsy and threadbare claims.

The first investigation claims that, since the Hamas attacks on Israel in October 2023, President Washington has allowed a climate of pervasive antisemitism on campus to develop. This is a claim directly rejected by nearly 80 Jewish faculty on campus, who have released a letter condemning "the attack on our university community and our GMU President under a false, racially divisive, and deeply cynical claim of combating antisemitism." Indeed, President Washington's response to pro-Palestinian protests in the wake of October 7 was, in our view, overtly coercive, revealing a willingness to sacrifice the free speech and academic freedom rights of students and faculty in the name of "maintaining order" on campus. He also capitulated to external pressure groups like the Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law by embedding–without faculty input–the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition and examples of antisemitism in GMU's anti-discrimination policy. This is a definition favored by the American right because it treats criticism of Israel and the Israeli military as inherently antisemitic. Given this record, Washington's administration has proven time and again that they are willing to take extraordinary–indeed, coercive and repressive–steps to respond to allegations of antisemitism (including cynical or weaponized allegations).

The second federal investigation alleges that President Washington's administration has engaged in "widespread policies in hiring and promotion that discriminate on the basis of race." By racial discrimination, of course, they are referring to the fantasy of "reverse racism" against white applicants. Nothing could be further from the truth. GMU has one of the most diverse student populations in the nation, with a majority of students identifying as Asian, Latino/Hispanic, or Black. Yet the professoriate at Mason is far less diverse, with a full-time instructional faculty that is nearly two-thirds white, while only about 10% of Mason's full-time instructional faculty identifies as Black or Latino/Hispanic.[3] The idea that somehow applicants of color are getting some kind of systemic preference is ludicrous.

The complaint further alleges that Washington built and maintains an elaborate infrastructure of racial preferences (for people of color) as part of the university's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.[4] This of course is another Trumpian fever dream: diversity and equity programming at Mason has always focused on increasing access and opportunity, rather than setting "quotas" or establishing preferences. But more to the point, over the past year, under

[3] Mason faculty data is from GMU's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning

[4] It should also be noted that the Trump administration's anti-diversity executive orders–upon which these investigations are based–are not settled law and are currently being litigated in court. Certainly it is debatable that these EOs can be applied to public universities established and funded by state governments.

pressure from a BOV dominated by political operatives from conservative think tanks, Washington has systematically *dismantled* virtually all programs and offices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In fact, last May, when this same BOV considered a sweeping anti-DEI resolution (much like one that passed earlier at UVa and Virginia Tech), they decided to table the motion. It was moot. Washington had already killed diversity programming at Mason.

At VA-AAUP, we have clearly had our differences with President Washington on policy issues large and small. Yet we recognize his many achievements as well. He has lived up to the promises he made when he was hired six years ago, and he and his team have built Mason into one of the most dynamic and important universities in the nation while still maintaining Mason's commitment to access and equal opportunity.

Virginia's universities and colleges lead the world precisely because they are independent from political pressure and state authority. In Virginia, faculty and students must be free to pursue knowledge without fear or favor. If the Trump administration–or its foot soldiers serving on Mason's Board of Visitors–succeed in forcing Washington from his position, it would not only irreparably harm GMU's reputation, but it would also be a chilling victory of authoritarianism and ideology over the principles of academic freedom and intellectual integrity.

We condemn this campaign to exert ideological and political control over higher education in Virginia, including these attempts to attack and displace our campus leaders. We stand united against these efforts, and we will fight for the independence of George Mason University, the University of Virginia, and every other public college and university in the Commonwealth.

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