aaup
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

July 5, 2025

Dear Colleagues,

We are writing with an urgent update regarding escalating events that threaten the independence, integrity, reputation, and governance of our university and others across the Commonwealth. We understand that many faculty members are busy with summer work and rest, so we will provide a brief overview with the most basic information first, followed by more details below for those who may want or need additional context.

Just the facts:
As you may know, University of Virginia President James Ryan recently announced his resignation under intense pressure from the Trump Department of Justice, which reportedly threatened to withhold federal funding unless he stepped down. According to reports by *The Washington Post*, these demands were not accidental but coordinated alongside the Governor's appointees to the UVA Board of Visitors.

We have every reason to believe that George Mason University is now the next target. Just this week, the U.S. Department of Education announced a new investigation alleging that Mason has "discriminated on the basis of national origin (shared Jewish ancestry)" by failing to address a purportedly pervasive hostile environment for Jewish students and faculty. We have reviewed this complaint and consider the allegations to be baseless. Instead, we see them as part of a coordinated political effort to weaken institutions led by pro-diversity presidents and to stifle academic freedom under the guise of civil rights enforcement.

Let's be clear: the attacks on our university are intensifying, and we strongly suspect the same forces that undermined UVA are now turning their full attention to Mason. The GMU-AAUP chapter has been warning about these coordinated threats to our public universities and the politicization of our higher education governing boards by the Governor and external entities for quite some time. While many of us are focusing on research, summer teaching, and long-overdue rest, this is a moment that requires vigilance, solidarity, and collective action. You and your colleagues can help push back against these attacks.

The first Board of Visitors meeting is set for August 1. The situation is changing quickly, and this meeting could be heated. Members of the Virginia Senate have filed a

lawsuit and requested an injunction to prevent unconfirmed appointees from being seated. Until this issue is settled, the validity of any actions taken by those appointees remains uncertain.

We therefore ask:

- **Mark your calendars for August 1.** If you are in the area, please make every effort to attend the meeting to bear witness. If you cannot be present, encourage colleagues and allies to show up.
- **Be prepared to speak out** in defense of academic freedom, shared governance, and the legal authority of the General Assembly.
- **Stay engaged and informed.** We will continue to share updates as events unfold.
- **Contact your VA legislators.** Tell them you are concerned about unfounded OCR allegations of antisemitism and the coordinated attacks directed at Mason and President Washington.

More context and detail:
These developments do not stand alone. They are occurring alongside a sustained campaign in the conservative press to discredit the university's leadership. Among the most telling examples is a recent piece in *City Journal*, a publication with documented ties to the Koch network and a consistent record of promoting right-wing narratives about higher education. Chris Rufo is a contributing editor there.

Understanding the network behind this coverage is especially important. The author of that piece, Ian Kingsbury, has long been a collaborator with Jay Greene, a Senior Research Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a prominent critic of diversity initiatives in education at Mason and beyond. Greene was a member of Kingsbury's doctoral committee at the University of Arkansas, and they frequently publish together on education policy aligned with conservative priorities. After leaving Arkansas, Greene joined Heritage, where he worked under Lindsey Burke, who also served on George Mason's Board of Visitors and chaired the Academic Affairs Committee. Burke is closely linked to the Education Freedom Institute, where she, Greene, and Kingsbury all serve as senior fellows or board members. In short, the same small group of individuals—connected through the University of Arkansas, the Heritage Foundation, and the Education Freedom Institute—have established a pipeline of ideologically driven research and commentary targeting universities like Mason.

It is also worth noting that Charles "Cully" Stimson, the current Rector of our Board of Visitors, is an executive at the Heritage Foundation. Greene has been an outspoken critic of Mason specifically, describing the university in public commentary as a symbol of what he calls "DEI overreach." These relationships are not coincidental, and they deserve scrutiny from anyone concerned about the integrity of our governance.

We are equally alarmed by the Governor and Attorney General's efforts to override the authority of the General Assembly by instructing rectors at UVA, VMI, and Mason to

seat Board appointees whose nominations the Senate Privileges and Elections Committee explicitly rejected. This defiance of the Legislature undermines the rule of law. It sets a dangerous precedent: that Boards of Visitors answer to the Governor and federal political operatives rather than to the people of Virginia.

Closer to home, we have also observed a decline in the norms of respectful governance at Mason. As former Visitor Bob Witeck detailed in his recent statement, Board meetings have increasingly been characterized by personal hostility, ideological grandstanding, and direct threats against university leadership. President Washington has faced demeaning and confrontational questioning. Staff have been taunted and publicly shamed. DEI efforts have been vilified as a “virus,” and faculty and administrators have been accused, without evidence, of illegal practices.

While we have sometimes disagreed with President Washington’s decisions, we do not believe any president should be removed through a campaign of political pressure and intimidation orchestrated from Richmond or Washington, D.C.

Our universities are not merely partisan tools; they must remain immune to being held hostage by reckless ideological campaigns, covert alliances, and intimidatory politicization. The unwavering pursuit of knowledge, the sacred right to teach without fear or bias, and the guarantee of transparent governance are not privileges—they are unwavering commitments to our students, our colleagues, and the public we serve.

Even as the summer quiets daily campus life, we are watching carefully. We are prepared to stand with you to defend George Mason University. As President Wolfson of the AAUP recently stated, these political and ideological attacks represent “an assault on a higher education system accessible to all, and thus on democracy itself.” We must do all we can to fight back.

In solidarity,
Bethany Letiecq, President, GMU-AAUP and the GMU-AAUP Executive Committee