

SENATE OF VIRGINIA

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34TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT
PART OF FAIRFAX COUNTY

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October 7, 2025

President Paul Mahoney
University of Virginia
P.O. Box 400224
Charlottesville, VA 22904

Rector Rachel Sheridan
University of Virginia Board of Visitors
Office of the Board of Visitors
Charlottesville, VA 22904

re: Proposed Trump Administration "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education"

Dear President Mahoney and Rector Sheridan:

We write to you today with grave concern regarding reports that the University of Virginia has been invited to sign the Trump Administration's "Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education." As the leadership of the Virginia Senate, we are compelled to express our unequivocal opposition to this proposal and to make clear the potential consequences should the University proceed with signing this compact.

This latest federal overture must be viewed in the context of the Trump Administration's recent and unprecedented interference in University operations. Just months ago, the Department of Justice forced the resignation of President James Ryan through what can only be described as extortionate tactics—threatening hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding and the livelihoods of employees, researchers, and students unless he stepped down. The Administration demanded his removal not for any failure of leadership, but because they disagreed with the University's approach to diversity and inclusion. President Ryan, who had led the University to record fundraising success and navigated it through extraordinary challenges, was sacrificed to federal political pressure.

The proposed compact represents an unprecedented federal intrusion into institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The conditions outlined—mandating sweeping changes to admissions and hiring practices, imposing so-called "institutional neutrality," freezing tuition for five years, capping international enrollment, and suppressing viewpoints—are fundamentally incompatible with the mission and values of a premier public research university. This is not a partnership; it is, as other university leaders have aptly described, political extortion.

Having already demonstrated its willingness to force out a university president who would not bend to its will, the Trump Administration now seeks to formalize its control through this compact. The pattern is clear: capitulation invites further interference, not protection. President Ryan's resignation was meant to spare the University from federal retaliation, yet here we are again, facing even more aggressive demands on institutional autonomy. The lesson is unmistakable—appeasing this Administration only emboldens further encroachment.

The University of Virginia was founded by Thomas Jefferson on principles of free inquiry and intellectual independence. To surrender these core values in exchange for preferential federal funding would betray not only Jefferson's vision but also the faculty, students, alumni, and citizens of the Commonwealth who have supported and sustained this institution for more than two centuries.

Beyond the fundamental assault on autonomy, the compact itself is rife with internal contradictions and operationally unworkable provisions that would cripple the University's ability to function. The document simultaneously demands that universities ban "belittlement" of "conservative ideas" while in the very next sentence proclaiming protection for "academic freedom in classrooms, teaching, research, and scholarship." These provisions are logically incompatible and would subject faculty, departments, and the University to arbitrary federal enforcement based on undefined and politically malleable standards.

Consider the practical impossibility: Under this compact, if a UVA economics professor teaches established free-trade principles—positions championed by Ronald Reagan and supported by rigorous empirical analysis—would that "belittle" the current administration's protectionist policies? Would the Department of Justice determine that such teaching violates the compact, triggering loss of all federal funding? The compact provides no clear standards, no due process, and threatens to return "all monies advanced by the U.S. government" if violations occur in two consecutive years. This would effectively shut down the University.

The compact's other provisions are equally destructive. It would eliminate holistic admissions in favor of purely metrics-based decisions, ending the consideration of leadership, creativity, resilience, and diverse talents that have made American universities engines of innovation. It would cap international student enrollment at arbitrary levels regardless of merit. It would mandate free tuition for STEM students while forcing humanities and social science students to subsidize them—a bizarre federal intrusion into institutional financial planning that devalues essential fields of study. It would prohibit faculty from speaking publicly on matters of societal importance except when they "directly impact the university"—a provision that would silence medical researchers advocating for public health, legal scholars commenting on constitutional issues, and economists warning about harmful trade policies.

The Virginia General Assembly has vigorously opposed the Trump Administration's interference with the University. When the Justice Department forced President Ryan's resignation, Senate Leadership rightly declared that "Trump's interference in the operation of Virginia's universities and any cooperation by those sworn to protect them will not be tolerated by the Virginia Senate." Virginia's U.S. senators, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, called the pressure campaign "outrageous" and affirmed that decisions about university leadership "belong solely to its Board of Visitors." Despite our vocal opposition, the Administration was undeterred and has now escalated its assault on institutional autonomy through this compact.

The principle remains clear: decisions about the University's academic policies, admissions standards, and institutional values belong to the University and the Commonwealth—not to federal bureaucrats pursuing a political agenda. Having failed to protect President Ryan from federal extortion, we must now draw a firmer line. The General Assembly will not stand by while the University surrenders its independence through this compact.

Therefore, we call upon you to immediately cease all consideration of signing this compact. Furthermore, we want to be explicitly clear: **if the University of Virginia signs this compact, there will be significant consequences in future Virginia budget cycles.** As the leadership of the Senate with responsibility for appropriations affecting higher education, we will work with our colleagues to ensure that the Commonwealth does not subsidize an institution that has ceded its independence to federal political control.

The University has difficult decisions to make regarding federal funding, but compromising your core mission is not a viable path forward. We urge you instead to join with other leading institutions in resisting this federal overreach and protecting the academic freedom and institutional autonomy that are essential to genuine higher education. As multiple scholars have noted, this compact is incoherent, contradictory, and drafted by officials who demonstrate no understanding of how universities operate or are funded. It is not a partnership—it is a trap that would subject the University to arbitrary federal enforcement with catastrophic financial consequences.

Moreover, signing this compact would violate the University's fiduciary duty to its students, faculty, and the Commonwealth. The vague and contradictory terms create legal exposure far exceeding any promised benefits. No responsible board could expose the institution to such unlimited and undefined federal control.

We expect the University to immediately cease all deliberations regarding this compact and to promptly notify the Trump Administration in writing that the University of Virginia will not consider signing this agreement. The Commonwealth and this institution's stakeholders deserve to see swift, unequivocal rejection of this federal overreach.

The Commonwealth is watching, and the General Assembly will act accordingly.

Very Truly Yours,



Senator Scott A. Surovell
34th District
Senate Majority Leader & Chair,
Courts of Justice Committee



Senator L. Louise Lucas
18th District
President Pro Tempore



Senator Mamie E. Locke
23rd District
Senate Democratic Caucus
Chairman

cc: Governor Glenn A. Youngkin
Secretary Aimee R. Guidera
Senator Ghazala F. Hashmi, Chair, Senate Education and Health Committee
Senator R. Creigh Deeds, 11th District
Speaker Don Scott
Delegate Charniele Herring
Delegate Sam Rasoul, Chair, House Education Committee
Delegate Katrina E. Callsen, 54th District
Porter N. Wilkinson, Vice Rector UVA Board of Visitors
Daniel M. Brody, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
Marvin W. Gilliam, Jr., Member, UVA Board of Visitors
Hon. Paul C. Harris, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
Stephen P. Long, M.D., Member, UVA Board of Visitors
Paul B. Manning, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
John L. Nau III, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
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Amanda L. Pillion, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
David F. Webb, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
Douglas D. Wetmore, Member, UVA Board of Visitors
James H. Lambert, Faculty Representative, UVA Board of Visitors
Gregory D. Perryman, Jr., Student Representative, UVA Board of Visitors