

September 28, 2026

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Professor Kristopher Hite
Department of Biochemistry
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061

Dear Professor Hite:

In your capacity as president of the Virginia Tech chapter of the American Association of University Professors, you have asked the staff of the AAUP's Department of Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Governance to advise you regarding the presidential search in progress at the university, with particular reference to Association-recommended principles and procedural standards. We are pleased to do so.

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The enclosed *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, jointly formulated by the AAUP, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, calls for "adequate communication" and "joint planning and effort" among the faculty, administration, and governing board in order to effectively carry out the wide variety of complex tasks performed by institutions of higher education. Joint effort, according to the statement, means that

(1) important areas of action involve at one time or another the initiating capacity and decision-making participation of all the institutional components and (2) differences in the weight of each voice, from one point to the next, should be determined by reference to the responsibility of each component for the particular matter at hand.

In other words, no decision with major ramifications for the institution should be made without involving the board, administration, and faculty, and the degree of involvement by each group should depend on each group's responsibilities.

The *Statement on Government* goes on to specifically emphasize the importance of joint effort—what we commonly call "shared governance"—in the search for a new president:

Joint effort of a most critical kind must be taken when an institution chooses a new president. The selection of a chief administrative officer should follow upon a cooperative search by the governing board and the faculty, taking into consideration the opinions of others who are appropriately interested. The president should be equally qualified to serve both as the executive officer of the governing board and as the chief

academic officer of the institution and the faculty. The president's dual role requires an ability to interpret to board and faculty the educational views and concepts of institutional government of the other. The president should have the confidence of the board and the faculty.

The enclosed statement *Faculty Participation in the Selection, Evaluation, and Retention of Administrators* provides additional detail regarding the conduct of a presidential search:

The *Statement on Government* emphasizes the primary role of faculty and board in the search for a president. . . . In a joint [search] committee, the numbers from each constituency should reflect both the primacy of faculty concern and the range of other groups, including students, that have a legitimate claim to some involvement. Each major group should elect its own members to serve on the committee, and the rules governing the search should be arrived at jointly. A joint committee should determine the size of the majority that will be controlling in making an appointment.

We note with regret that the composition of the Virginia Tech presidential search committee appears to fall short of these standards in at least two respects. First, according to the university webpage devoted to the search, there are only two faculty members on the twenty-member search committee.¹ Comprising one-tenth of the committee's membership cannot be said to adequately "reflect . . . the primacy of faculty concern." Second, you report that neither faculty member was elected by the faculty; they were instead appointed to the committee—presumably by the administration—by virtue of their serving as the presidents of the faculty senate and of the administrative and professional faculty senate. The faculty therefore had no opportunity to directly elect its only two representatives to the search committee.

The report *Confidentiality and Faculty Representation in Academic Governance* (also enclosed) sets forth additional principles and procedural standards relevant to presidential searches:

Unless mandated to be open by state law, many such searches [for higher administrative officers] have an initial, confidential screening stage conducted by a search committee that includes faculty members. The next stage is normally one in which finalists are interviewed. At this point in the process, the names of finalists should be made public to the campus community so that the community at large, faculty committees, or at least selected faculty members have an opportunity to interview the finalists and forward their views to the search committee or to a consulting firm employed by the college or university.

Recognizing that "candidates for positions are usually administrative officers elsewhere and do not want it known on their home campuses that they are seeking other employment," the report articulates protections for such candidates:

¹ <https://search.president.vt.edu/index.html>.

The following principles on confidentiality in faculty searches, set forth in the statement on *The Ethics of Recruitment and Faculty Appointments* [also enclosed], demonstrate the Association's support for the right of a candidate to withdraw from the search at the time finalists are publicly announced, and these principles are clearly applicable to administrative searches as well: "Institutions should respect the confidentiality of candidates for faculty positions. The institution may contact references, including persons who are not identified by the candidate, but it should exercise discretion when doing so. An institution should not make public the names of candidates without having given the candidates the opportunity to withdraw from the search."

The report concludes with the following recommendation: "Searches for presidents and other chief academic officers should have an open phase that allows individual faculty members as well as faculty bodies to review the credentials of finalists, ask questions, and share opinions before a final decision is made."

An August 20 letter to the Virginia Tech community from Dr. Nancy Dye, vice rector and chair of the presidential search committee, would appear to cast doubt on the openness of the search. It states in pertinent part,

As with most searches for presidents of major research universities, confidentiality remains a critical component of the process. Potential candidates serve in prominent leadership positions at universities, research institutions, government agencies, or other organizations and will only participate in the search with the expectation that their identities remain private throughout the search. *National search firms and governing boards routinely rely on this approach to ensure access to the strongest possible pool of candidates, a practice highlighted in similar presidential searches conducted at leading institutions across the country.* (Emphasis added)

The Association's most recent empirical data regarding the confidentiality of presidential searches refutes the italicized assertion: The enclosed *2021 AAUP Shared Governance Survey* found that, overall, "54.7 percent of institutions . . . reported that the most recent presidential search was open." The survey also found, more specifically, that 74.7 percent of *public* institutions reported that their most recent presidential search was open.

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The significant deficiencies in the composition of the Virginia Tech presidential search committee are unfortunate. Nevertheless, we would expect the committee to provide for "an open phase that allows individual faculty members as well as faculty bodies to review the credentials of finalists, ask questions, and share opinions before a final decision is made." Doing so would be consistent with both AAUP-recommended procedural standards and the recent practices of three-fourths of public universities and colleges in the US.

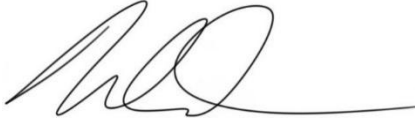
Professor Kristopher Hite

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We hope these comments prove useful to you and your colleagues. Please do let me know if you should have any questions.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael DeCesare', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael DeCesare

Senior Program Officer

Department of Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Governance

Enclosures by email attachment

Cc: Professor Timothy Gibson, President, Virginia AAUP Conference

Professor Afshan Jafar, Chair, AAUP Committee on College and University Governance