



June 13, 2024

Suzanne Obenshain, Rector-Elect
James Madison University Board of Visitors
Harrisonburg, VA 22807

Dear JMU Board of Visitors Rector-Elect Obenshain,

The recent announcement that JMU's provost will soon step down raises the possibility of improved campus climate, transparency, and shared governance. To these ends, the JMU presidential search can, and should, reflect a serious commitment by the BOV to these principles. However, the process by which the search committee was constituted and its composition fail to do so.

To begin to restore the faculty's confidence in JMU administration, the presidential search must reflect the fact that faculty and faculty expertise are at the heart of the university's mission. Accordingly, a robust representation of faculty on the presidential hiring committee is needed. As presently composed, the presidential search committee includes nine BOV members, one student, one dean, the President/CEO of the JMU Foundation, and only one faculty member who also serves as the Faculty Athletic Representative.

This approach to the presidential search gives faculty a minimal, marginal, and largely symbolic role in the process of choosing the university's chief academic officer. It reflects neither an appropriate recognition of the importance of the faculty's role in shared governance and in the academic mission of the university, nor an acceptable level of transparency.

The paucity of faculty representation is an affront to faculty expertise and tenets of shared governance and runs counter to regional exemplars. For example, William and Mary as well as the University of Virginia had more faculty representation on their recent presidential search committees than JMU. More widely, West Virginia University's upcoming presidential search committee includes three faculty members selected by the Faculty Senate.

In addition, national associations strongly urge universities to avail themselves of faculty expertise when selecting new presidents. Notably, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges states that the committee should “include representatives from the faculty and, in smaller numbers, perhaps administrators, alumni, students, or members of the broader community.” In addition, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) notes that joint efforts are critical when an institution chooses a new president. 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 should have the confidence of the board and the faculty”¹ - an impossibility if faculty do not represent the majority of members on presidential search committees.

Consequently, we respectfully request that full-time academic (instructional) faculty members represent the majority of members of the presidential search committee. We suggest that Speaker of the Faculty Senate Dr. Kathy Ott-Walter and other academic instructional faculty members (as chosen by the Faculty Senate) be added to complement the voices of the College of Business Dean Dr. Busing, Faculty Athletics Representative Dr. Soenksen, and the other committee members.

We look forward to your response. We respectfully request a reply no later than Wednesday, June 19, 2024 at which date we will publish this letter, along with your response, on our website (aaupjmu.com).

And finally, we are happy to discuss this in more detail and to provide relevant AAUP (aaup.org) recommendations and statements on presidential searches and shared governance.

Sincerely,

JMU-AAUP Executive Committee

Bill White, Professor, College of Education
Roger Thelwell, Professor, College of Science and Math
Thomas Adajian, Associate Professor, College of Arts and Letters
Jennifer Lang-Rigal, Associate Professor, College of Arts and Letters

¹ <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>