

OPINIONS

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opinions@timesdispatch.com • (804) 649-6007

KELLY TILL, President and Publisher
ENCARNACION PYLE, Executive Editor

To submit Letters to the Editor
letters@timesdispatch.com
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To submit or propose guest columns
oped@timesdispatch.com
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A THREAT TO INDEPENDENCE

No place for politics in higher-ed boardrooms

As we watch unprecedented attacks on the autonomy and independence of American higher education, it's tempting to think this is something new. But higher education has never existed apart from politics. Political influence, gubernatorial appointments of trustees, budgetary decisions and legislative involvement in higher education leadership have been constants for two centuries. In 1926, an official from the University of Nevada cautioned about the politicization of higher education in the face of legislative efforts to prevent the teaching of evolution. Debates about what can be taught in our classroom continue today. But what has changed is how politics are increasingly entering the board room through the appointment of ideologically aligned trustees, raising "the red flag of danger."

Over the past five years, we have been tracking a worrying trend as board members are increasingly being selected and appointed not for their civic or fiduciary qualifications, but for their ideological alignment with political leaders on the state and federal levels. In Virginia, in 2023, Attorney General Jason Miyares issued a legal opinion at the behest of Gov. Glenn Youngkin that upended decades of precedent by stating that trustees of Virginia's public colleges and universities are first and foremost responsible to the commonwealth instead of the institution. Subsequently, Virginia's Secretary of Education Aimee Guidera launched a campaign to interfere in board governance and align decision-making with the state administration's ideological priorities. There are other examples of using trustees to drive political agendas in Florida, Ohio, Texas and others.

Using political alignment as a litmus test for potential trustees fundamentally misunderstands the role of governing boards. This disconnect has led to an increasing number of boards more inclined to rubber-stamp political priorities instead of exercising independent fiduciary judgment and stewarding the institution's mission for the long-term. The outcome when boards themselves become extensions of political actors? Faculty, staff, students and the public can no longer be sure that institutional resources are being stewarded in service of mission rather than short-term political demands.

But what does that really mean? Presidents and faculty are losing trusted partners in shared governance. The focus of the board drifts from long-term educational outcomes and fiduciary stewardship to short-term political or reputational concerns. Presidents who once relied on aligned, mission-driven partnerships with boards now often face boards whose loyalty lies elsewhere, becoming uniquely vulnerable to attack and even termination on ideological grounds. Institutions no longer respond directly to the public but rather to one particular segment, leaving a large proportion feeling their views and interests are no longer represented or welcome. And of



MICHAEL MARTZ, TIMES-DISPATCH

George Mason University President Gregory Washington, Gov. Glenn Youngkin and Glenn Davis, director of the Virginia Department of Energy, attend the dedication of the first full-scale simulated control room for small modular reactors in September at Mason's Arlington County campus.

course, when the political balance shifts, a different segment of the public feels alienated.

Following the impacts even further downstream, institutions in the grip of a politically-driven board face challenges recruiting and retaining faculty, senior leaders and staff, limiting their ability to provide an exceptional education and student experience. Institutional progress may be stalled as presidents depart — voluntarily or not — and new leaders are hard to recruit in the face of political interference. Donors may step away from their commitments while students and parents may remove such institutions from their consideration, creating very real financial pressures for institutions already facing budget uncertainty.

Freeing boards from political interference isn't based on opposition to the political party exerting control. It's based on historical success of institutions with boards that understand their responsibility is to uphold fiduciary duties of care, loyalty and obedience to the institution's mission. That requires independence — not deference to appointing authorities, and especially not alignment with passing ideological agendas. At the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), this is our mantra: Boards must recommit to mission stewardship which involves protecting academic freedom, ensuring student success, preserving institutional reputation, and strengthening long-term sustainability. We stand ready to help them do this vital work through initiatives like Govern Now.

I believe it is possible for boards to embrace public accountability without capitulating to noise or ideology. These boards serve as a stabilizing force, anchoring decision-making in values and mission even under pressure. It isn't easy work, and it requires constant vigilance and a regular recommitment to the values that undergird the most envied and valued higher education system in the world — institutional autonomy, shared governance, academic freedom and reasoned inquiry. These values represent the very foundation of America's higher education system, and can be undermined if we are not vigilant.

Ross A. Mugler is interim president and CEO of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) and the longest-serving board of visitors member at a single institution in Virginia, having been appointed to the Old Dominion University (ODU) Board of Visitors by five governors and having served as rector at ODU.

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Rural broadband connectivity in Va. facing a serious threat

Just over one year ago, Hurricane Helene made landfall. The storm caused an estimated \$4 billion in damage, with damage to Virginia's farms estimated at \$159 million. Even still parts of the state continue to experience the aftermath of the historic devastation.

Getting our state, including southern and southwest Virginia's communities moving again, will require more than just rebuilding. It's also about creating ready, reliable access to high-speed broadband internet. Broadband is vital to communications that are critical for our first responders and residents during an emergency. It also ensures educational resources reach our students, and businesses can effectively compete in the marketplace. This technology must be a priority, particularly for rural America.

Currently, portions of Southern Virginia have some of the lowest broadband connectivity levels in the state. Southampton, Greenville, Brunswick, Charlotte, Cumberland, Prince Edward and Nottoway counties all have 100+ Mbps connectivity levels below 50%. That means roughly 100,000 Virginians face significant inequities in broadband access.

To that end, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration has allocated \$1.48 billion in BEAD funding to Virginia. To ensure greater access for our rural communities and fix the longstanding inequity in broadband availability, urgent action by Congress and President Trump is required, otherwise the goal of reliable high-speed broadband for everyone could stall, at great cost.

Over the past few years, rural and last-mile broadband providers have created tens of thousands of direct and indirect jobs while installing countless miles of cable that mean greater connectivity for people across the state. Broadband providers have worked hard, especially here in Virginia, to build this network. However, because of an unintended consequence in the 2017 tax law, the effectiveness of these federal broadband grants



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

In September 2024, floodwaters from Tropical Storm Helene relocated several homes and destroyed roads, including in front of Barrett House Riverside Lodging in Damascus.

has been drastically reduced and many broadband providers who have been doing yeoman's work are facing a massive tax burden on those same federal grant dollars the government issued.

That's right. The government wants to tax the grants it allocated to these providers at around 20%. This means funds intended by Congress to be allocated to broadband deployment into the communities that need it most, will instead be clawed back by Washington. The same problem exists at the state level, where federal broadband grants are taxed by the commonwealth too. Critical resources that were intended to connect rural residents, schools, health clinics and businesses could be taken away from us.

Federal broadband grants were never supposed to be taxable. When Congress launched the National Broadband Plan and the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP), grants were explicitly non-taxable. These lost resources will now mean fewer miles of fiber-optic cable laid, wages lost for employees doing this critical infrastructure work, a more challenging business climate for the farmers and rural businesses and less access to educational resources for young people.

Legislation is currently before the U.S. House and Senate that would restore the non-taxable status of federal broadband grants. Alternatively, President Donald J. Trump, through the Office of Management and Budget, has the ability to protect this funding and our rural communi-

ties with an executive order. This would ensure every federal dollar allocated for broadband connectivity is put to that use, rather than sent back to Washington. Similar legislation will also be introduced in the Virginia General Assembly.

Broadband internet access isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. Today, Virginians are competing economically against companies across the nation and around the world. To make it in the global economy, it means having access to the latest, high-speed internet service. High-speed internet is critically important to jobs, infrastructure and national security. It is also more resilient against natural disasters like Hurricane Helene.

Taxing these federal broadband grants will undo that progress, wiping out jobs and opportunity in the very communities that need them most. Hospitals, schools and law enforcement will be more vulnerable.

We need our leaders in Washington to advance S.674/H.R.1873. This critical legislation will ensure we fully fund President Trump's Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment program. More importantly, it will make a significant difference in the quality of life for our friends and neighbors who live in rural communities and deserve better.

Richard Schollmann is the executive director of the Virginia Broadband Industry Association, whose member companies are building the rural broadband network across parts of Virginia.

ANOTHER VIEW | DALLAS MORNING NEWS EDITORIAL BOARD

Peanut allergies — and why scientific advice often changes

In the early 2000s, the advice for parents was clear: Don't feed babies and toddlers foods containing peanuts. It might increase the child's risk of developing a severe allergy to the ground nut.

By the late 2010s, newer research pushed pediatricians to advise the opposite. Parents should introduce peanut products before children turn a year old because it might keep youngsters from developing a peanut allergy. Now, a recent study that analyzed medical records of tens of thousands of children validated the introduce-peanuts-early guidance.

This flip-flopping health advice drives many conscientious parents crazy. If they follow advice that later proves wrong, they may feel guilty or distrustful. If they ignore medical guidelines, friends or relatives may question their judgment. The country's polarized political environment, in which Americans' party affiliation tends to influence whom they trust for health information, only exacerbates the situation.

As frustrating as it may be, the evolving guidance about peanuts is exactly how science is supposed to work. A question arises — why are peanut allergies increasing among children



DREAMSTIME/TNS

in Western countries? — and scientists tackle it. Answering that question could take many researchers many years of effort.

They need to confirm whether the trend is real, rather than an artifact of a new diagnostic tool. They may compare diets of babies in places where food allergies are increasing against places where food allergy rates are stable. They will test multiple hypotheses, trying to understand exactly why the incidence is rising. It is detailed, painstaking work.

With a potentially life-threatening condition, like a severe food allergy, clinicians want to offer diet or treatment guidelines promptly. Sometimes, the advice isn't effective, but the research continues and guidance evolves to incorporate new findings.

For much of the 20th century, for example, physicians believed firmly that stress, diet and smoking caused peptic ul-

cers. In the 1980s, Australian researchers discovered that a corkscrew-shaped bacterium, *Helicobacter pylori*, could cause the ulcers. (One scientist even helped validate the hypothesis by drinking a solution laced with the bacteria and making himself sick.)

It took several years to convince skeptical peers, but antibiotics ultimately became the standard treatment for ulcer patients who harbored the bacteria.

The recent peanut allergy study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, is compelling. It found that the incidence of peanut allergies declined after doctors began recommending that parents introduce peanut products early. A commentary published in the same journal offered some caveats, but the introduce-early advice stands for now.

Reliable medical advice is based on multiple, carefully designed studies, involving large numbers of people, that point in the same direction. Advice can and should change over time, but only after a systematic process that incorporates new information and expert reviews. The process is not perfect, but it's far more trustworthy than a trending video on TikTok.