

November 20, 2025

The Hon. Abigail Spanberger
Governor-elect
Commonwealth of Virginia
Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Governor-elect Spanberger:

Congratulations on your recent election. On behalf of the Board of Directors and membership of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, I look forward to working with you and your administration to strengthen the governance of all institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Recent Challenges to Good Governance in the Commonwealth

In recent months, Virginia has become a prominent example of a worrying national shift toward appointing public college and university trustees based not on their civic or fiduciary qualifications but on their ideological alignment with state or federal political leaders. In 2023, Commonwealth Attorney General Jason Miyares issued a legal opinion at the behest of Governor Glenn Youngkin that upended decades of precedent by stating that trustees of Virginia's public institutions are first and foremost responsible to the Commonwealth instead of the institution. Subsequently, Secretary of Education Aimee Guidera launched a campaign to interfere in board governance and align decision-making with the state administration's ideological priorities.

Consequences of Undermining Good Governance

The downstream effects of this trend have mostly notably resulted in the departures of University of Virginia President James Ryan and Virginia Military Institute Superintendent Cedric Wins, and the targeting of George Mason University President Gregory Washington, but the impacts are far broader. Recent battles in the General Assembly over the appointment of additional trustees nominated by the Youngkin administration foreshadow the potential for an ongoing tit-for-tat partisan approach that threatens to leave boards without quorums (as in the case of George Mason University), universities without direction and momentum, and students, faculty and staff demoralized.

In addition, 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 politicized institutions from their consideration, creating very real financial pressures for institutions already facing budget uncertainty.

Reclaiming the Commonwealth's Reputation for Good Governance

As you prepare to take office, AGB is pleased to offer the following policy recommendations to put the Commonwealth's institutions back on a path to board excellence:

1. **Revisit the selection process for members of the Board of Visitors** of the Commonwealth's public institutions to ensure they are selected based on fiduciary or civic experience and that the role of and expectations for trustees are clearly articulated and agreed to during the selection process.
2. **Revisit training required for members of the Board of Visitors** to ensure that it addresses pressing current issues such as the erosion of institutional autonomy, challenges to academic freedom, and governmental overreach into the work of boards. This training should be delivered by an organization that is focused on best practices and achieving board excellence, not an organization that is politically or ideologically driven.
3. **Revisit requirements for members of the Board of Visitors by adding a certification component** that each trustee must sign at the end of their training, affirming their support for the mission, vision, and values of their respective universities. This certification should also reflect the basic AGB Principles of Trusteeship included with this letter.
4. **Reform the nomination process** to include the involvement of the General Assembly to lessen the ability of any future governor from using trustee appointments to drive blatantly political agendas. I briefly discussed these issues with you during the campaign and have been in contact with Senators Locke and Surovell.

AGB has a long history of supporting strong, independent governance in Virginia, having helped design the Commonwealth's original recommended board training and worked closely with Governor Warner's Administration to strengthen the appointment and vetting process after periods of politically driven board placements. Under that framework, appointees who missed SCHEV's training were required to complete AGB training, which reinforced the core fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and obedience. Our work has consistently contrasted with ideologically motivated approaches that encouraged trustees

to interfere in curriculum and tenure decisions—practices that ultimately led the General Assembly to reject several politicized appointments.

As Virginia again confronts challenges stemming from ideological agendas and the prior Attorney General opinion, AGB stands ready to partner with SCHEV to provide nonpartisan, principles-based training that protects institutional autonomy, a value central to the Commonwealth since before the founding era. We would welcome the opportunity to assist you and legislative leaders in strengthening continuity in board appointments, safeguarding institutions from overreach, and ensuring trustees receive high-quality, certificate-based training grounded in AGB's *Principles of Trusteeship* (enclosed). Please do not hesitate to call on me or on the AGB team if we can be of assistance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ross D. Mugler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ross" and last name "Mugler" clearly legible.

Ross Mugler
Interim President and CEO
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges

Cc:

The Hon. Don Scott, Speaker of the House of Delegates
The Hon. Scott Surovell, Senate Majority Leader
The Hon. L. Louise Lucas, President pro tempore of the Senate
The Hon. Charniele Herring, House Majority Leader
The Hon. Maime E. Locke, Chair of the Senate Rules Committee
The Hon. Aaron R. Rouse, Chair of Privileges and Elections
The Hon. Marcia Price, Chair of Privileges and Elections
The Hon. Sam Rasoul, Chair of the House Education Committee