

February 25, 2026

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

Dear Governor Spanberger:

I write to follow up on our November 20, 2025 letter concerning the governance of Virginia's public colleges and universities. As you work to tackle the many challenges facing higher education in Virginia, we believe it would be helpful to restate the policy recommendations offered in that correspondence and to add a fifth, complementary recommendation that reflects lessons drawn from recent governance failures across the Commonwealth.

As outlined in our November 20 letter, AGB recommends the following actions to strengthen board effectiveness and protect institutional stability:

First, revisit the selection process for members of the Boards of Visitors of the Commonwealth's public institutions to ensure that trustees are chosen based on fiduciary or civic experience, and that the role of and expectations for trustees are clearly articulated and acknowledged during the appointment process.

Second, revisit the training required for members of the Boards of Visitors to ensure that it addresses pressing current challenges, including the erosion of institutional autonomy, threats to academic freedom, and governmental overreach into board responsibilities. Such training should be delivered by organizations focused on best practices in higher education governance and board excellence, rather than by entities driven by political or ideological objectives.

Third, revisit trustee requirements by adding a certification component at the conclusion of required training, affirming each trustee's support for the mission, vision, and values of their institution. This certification should also reflect adherence to the core Principles of Trusteeship, including fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and obedience.

Fourth, reform the nomination process to include meaningful involvement of the General Assembly, reducing the ability of any future governor to use trustee appointments to advance overtly political agendas and helping to preserve continuity, balance, and institutional trust.

In addition to these four recommendations, AGB now recommends an additional targeted reform:

Fifth, establish mandatory, role-specific training for Board Chairs (Rectors) prior to assuming the chair role, with ongoing reinforcement throughout their term.

The Rector occupies a uniquely influential position within institutional governance. As the board's agenda-setter, the primary liaison with the president, and a highly visible public representative of the institution, the Rector's conduct and judgment can disproportionately shape institutional outcomes. When this role is exercised without a clear understanding of fiduciary boundaries, shared governance norms, and the limits of individual authority, missteps can escalate rapidly into institutional crises.

Recent experience in Virginia demonstrates that many of the most damaging governance breakdowns have not stemmed from collective board action, but from inappropriate, uninformed, or politicized conduct by individual Rectors. In several instances, these actions reflected failures to respect institutional autonomy, misunderstandings of ethical leadership responsibilities, or confusion between governance and management—errors that have had especially severe consequences for presidential effectiveness, institutional reputation, and leadership retention.

Focused, role-specific training for Rectors should therefore emphasize ethical leadership, the responsible use of power, respect for institutional autonomy, and the critical distinction between board oversight and administrative management. Requiring such preparation prior to assuming the chair role, and reinforcing it throughout a Rector's term, would significantly strengthen board leadership at the point where governance failures are often most consequential.

AGB stands ready to work with your administration and with SCHEV to support the implementation of these recommendations and to help restore and sustain the Commonwealth's longstanding reputation for strong, independent, and principled governance of its public institutions.

Respectfully,



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

Cc:

Candi Mundon King, Secretary of the Commonwealth

Dr. Jeffery O. Smith, Secretary of Education

Connor Andrews, Deputy Secretary of Education