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**To:** [ANNOUNCE09-L@LISTSERV.GMU.EDU](mailto:ANNOUNCE09-L@LISTSERV.GMU.EDU) <[ANNOUNCE09-L@LISTSERV.GMU.EDU](mailto:ANNOUNCE09-L@LISTSERV.GMU.EDU)>

**Subject:** Background on new investigation from Department of Justice

Dear fellow Patriots:

As anticipated, the US Department of Justice has joined the US Department of Education to investigate allegations of discriminatory hiring practices at George Mason University. I am writing to update you on what we understand to be unfolding.

George Mason University learned of the new investigation when a news release was distributed yesterday. Because the Board of Visitors has opted to outsource the university's engagement with federal agencies to the Torridon Law firm, university staff is not able to make direct contact with the DOJ in order to learn more about the complaint.

Regardless, we will as always work in good faith to cooperate fully with the investigation, and are gathering requested information as required. We remain confident that facts and evidence show that George Mason does not engage in "illegal DEI," as the general accusation has been labeled.

Based on yesterday's news release and accompanying letter sent to the law firm, it appears parts of the complaint are based on outdated digital posts, namely a tweet from my account from June 27, 2022, in which I praised a faculty member's award for his work in diversity and inclusivity, and a livestreamed town hall from November 2020, in which a group of university leaders described how we hoped to answer the public's demand for more inclusivity in university operations.

### **Historical context**

I am compelled to offer historical reminders to students, faculty, and staff who were not on campus in 2020. Context is vital to fully understanding why these statements were appropriate at the time and in fact were complying with state mandates.

Both the 2020 video town hall and my 2022 tweet occurred in the wake of several tragic events culminating in George Floyd's murder. As part of addressing this national reckoning, we were examining ourselves, looking for ways to become better. Not only were we working to improve, being Virginia's largest and most diverse public university meant government leaders and the public expected George Mason to play a meaningful part in creating structures and programming to address old biases and persistent inequalities in business operations.

Engagement with local and state governments ensued, and this culminated in Gov. Ralph Northam announcing the launch of the [ONE Virginia plan](#) in March 2021 to advance "inclusive excellence across state agencies." At the time, then-Director of the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management Emily Elliott said, "We charge all agency leaders to adopt the

ONE Virginia Plan and subsequent Principles of Community to create an engaged workforce that leverages diversity as a strength ... and practices that hold each agency accountable for expanded access, success, and overall inclusive excellence.” And George Mason did as expected by state government.

In March 2021 Virginia also enacted amendments to [Virginia Code 2.2-602](#), which now requires George Mason and all state agencies to “establish and maintain a comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic plan in coordination with” the Governor’s Office. Law requires the plan to “integrate the diversity, equity, and inclusion goals into the agency’s mission, operations, programs, and infrastructure.” It goes on to require us to address “barriers to equal employment opportunities,” “foster pay equity,” “promote diversity and equity in hiring,” and “promote employee engagement and inclusivity.”

This is current law in Virginia.

Our practices and initiatives including some being questioned by the DOJ, emanated from this framework. They were developed in collaboration with our Board of Visitors, and through shared governance with our students, faculty and staff. It has never been a “one man show” at Mason.

After the 2021 gubernatorial elections, newly appointed members of the Board of Visitors who held critical views of DEI activities began directing staff to review and scale back DEI efforts by late 2023. However, in June of 2022, the new Governor had not yet rolled back those directives in the ONE Virginia plan. By 2025, after a year of study from two university committees whose membership included board members and staff, and followed by a subsequent restructuring, the board instructed us to dismantle programs and reassign or eliminate staff, which we have done.

Just as we complied with leadership expectations to increase DEI programming, we have also worked in good faith to follow directives in the opposite direction. Throughout the shifts, we have leaned on our institutional values, and stayed true to our core ethos to remain a constant beacon of welcoming and inclusivity to everyone who seeks us out. It’s a very difficult path to travel, but we have worked in earnest to maintain that path.

### **Free expression, but not exclusionary policies**

It is true that on regular occasions I have publicly and passionately expressed my aspirations and goals to erase bias against any and all groups, and maintain an environment welcoming to all who seek it out. I remain as passionate about that today as I was when I arrived in July 2020.

It is inaccurate to conclude that we created new university policies or procedures that discriminated against or excluded anyone. To the contrary, our systems were enhanced to improve on our ability to consistently include everyone for consideration of every employment opportunity. That is our ethos and it is core to our identity as a national leader in inclusive excellence in higher education.

Being under such federal investigations is not familiar territory to George Mason, and I understand how this can be upsetting and distracting to so many who work or study here. As we work through this, it is my hope that we will be granted due process to explain in detail much of what I have highlighted above. I will always do my best to keep you as informed as possible on events as they occur.

We have weathered so much as one community, not least of which a pandemic and a recession. As always, we will come through this as the George Mason community always does: together.

Sincerely,

Gregory Washington  
President