

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

January 13, 2026

Dr. Brian O. Hemphill
President
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia 23529

Dear President Hemphill:

Members of the faculty at Old Dominion University have sought the advice and assistance of the American Association of University Professors as a result of an online education proposal the administration has advanced which appears to us to raise important issues relating to the role of the faculty in the governance of the institution. We understand that this proposal entails a reorganization of distance education programs, which makes fundamental changes in long-established academic arrangements. We also understand that you announced this proposal, entitled the “Forward-Focused Digital Transformation Initiative” (FFDTI), in August 2025, which, as the university’s website states, is a “comprehensive digital transformation” that will “reposition” the university’s “academic core.” We understand further that the initiative mandates all distance education programs adopt an eight-week asynchronous format, eliminates synchronous online course delivery, and appears to compel faculty to use specific learning activities, including forms of assessment. Faculty members have called into question the academic and educational soundness of the proposed reorganization and have challenged your claim that the initiative is an “operational” decision, which you have the sole authority to make. Faculty have stated that at no time prior to the announcement of the initiative did you meaningfully consult with the faculty senate or the wider faculty forum.

The Association's interest in these matters stems from our longstanding concern for sound academic governance, the principles of which are enunciated in the enclosed *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, originally formulated in conjunction with the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The AAUP adopted the document as policy, and the other two organizations commended it to the attention of their respective constituents. The *Statement on Government*, which embodies standards widely upheld in American higher education, rests on the premise of appropriately shared responsibility and cooperative action among the governing board, the administration, and the faculty in determining educational policy and in resolving educational problems within the academic institution. It refers to "an inescapable interdependence" in this relationship which requires "adequate communication among these components, and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort." It further asserts that "the interests of all are coordinate and related, and unilateral effort can lead to confusion or conflict." Section V of the *Statement on Government* defines the particular role of the faculty in institutional government, stating in pertinent part:

The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. On these matters the power of review or final decision lodged in the governing board or delegated by it to the president should be exercised adversely only in exceptional circumstances, and for reasons communicated to the faculty. It is desirable that the faculty should, following such communication, have opportunity for further consideration and further transmittal of its views to the president or board.

The particular authority and primary responsibility of the faculty in the decision-making processes of the academic institution in these areas derive from its special competence in the educational sphere. It follows from this proposition that the faculty should play an active and meaningful role in the development as well as in the revision of institutional policy in those areas in which the faculty has primary responsibility. Also implicit in the foregoing passage is the expectation that the faculty will play a primary role in the establishment as well as in any subsequent revision or modification of the institution's academic structure.

The AAUP's *Statement on Online Education* affirms that

[u]nder the principles of academic government set forth in the AAUP's *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, the faculty has primary responsibility for decisions regarding curriculum and instruction, which include the technological infrastructure for all courses, whether online, in-person, or hybrid. The faculty also has primary responsibility for determining the appropriate ratio of in-person to online and hybrid courses. No course should be offered online or in a hybrid format without the consent of the instructor of record and the faculty in the department or program to which that course belongs.

Faculty members allege that the rapid implementation of the initiative mandates, which is scheduled for fall 2026, violates both principles of faculty governance and academic freedom as set forth in the university's *Teaching and Research Faculty Handbook*. They have complained that the limited data shared by the administration in support of its decision to move all online courses to an eight-week asynchronous format is neither complete nor compelling. They state that you have been unresponsive to their efforts to persuade you to consult meaningfully with the senate or the faculty forum. They report that the faculty senate passed a September 30 "Resolution for Reconsideration and Inclusive Involvement in Forward Focused Digital Transformation (FFDT) Initiative Implementation" by an overwhelming margin. They report further that when the faculty senate and the ODU AAUP chapter held a forum shortly thereafter attended by almost one hundred and fifty teaching and research faculty, it resulted in an extensive list of faculty questions and concerns about the initiative, which was then sent to you. Your response in an October 10 forum, faculty members report, was to reaffirm your

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contention that because the planning and implementation of the initiative was an “operational” decision, it did not violate principles of academic freedom or shared governance.

We understand that among the corrective measures faculty members seek is that the administration and the board of visitors agree to delay the initiative’s implementation in order to provide reasonable opportunities for meaningful consultation with the faculty, including allowing them adequate time to identify the online courses that should continue to be offered in a sixteen-week and/or synchronous and/or mixed format.

We appreciate that the information in our possession on the matters addressed in this letter has come to us almost entirely from faculty sources at Old Dominion University, and that you may have additional information that would contribute to our understanding of the events we have recounted and the issues with which we are concerned. We would accordingly welcome your comments.

Sincerely,



Anita Levy, Ph.D.
Senior Program Officer
Department of Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Governance

Enclosures via email

cc: Mr. P. Murry Pitts, Rector, Board of Visitors, Old Dominion University
Professor Katherine Hawkins, Interim President, Old Dominion University AAUP
Chapter
Professor Michael Carhart, Incoming President, Old Dominion University
AAUP Chapter