

George Cohen, chair of the University of Virginia Faculty Senate, delivered these remarks today as the Board of Visitors was about to meet to reconsider the employment status of President Teresa A. Sullivan.

Standing Up for Our Principles

Remarks by Faculty Senate Chair George Cohen to the U.Va. Community, June 26, 2012

We are gathered here on the historic Lawn of the University of Virginia for the fourth time since the current crisis began on June 10. We represent all segments of the University community: faculty, administrators, students, staff, alumni, local residents, and others. Statements of support have been issued far beyond our Grounds, from colleagues at Georgetown, UNC Chapel Hill, The University of Maryland, and more. The American Association of University Professors stands behind us as well.

We stand here to watch and to listen. We await action from our Board of Visitors. We seek the answer to a simple question: what will the future of the University of Virginia look like?

This is not a time for long, passionate speeches, and I will not make one. What I will do is try to set out in the simplest terms why so many of us are here today and why we have been working tirelessly since June 10 to secure the reinstatement of our President, Teresa Sullivan.

We believe President Sullivan has been an effective president. Why do so many people in the University community believe that? Because President Sullivan embodies a set of principles and acts on those principles. That is what makes an effective leader. What are those principles? Honesty, candor, openness, transparency, inclusion, consultation, communication, fairness, dignity, and trust. These are time-honored principles, and they work. What observers of our community are witnessing is our commitment to these principles. We stand here for these principles and we will continue to stand to ensure they are upheld.

We believe that the forced resignation of President Sullivan was an error in judgment by the Board. We believe that the process leading up to and resulting in the forced resignation was flawed and, most important, inconsistent with the principles for which President Sullivan – and the University – stand. It was done in secret. It was done without full and open discussion within the Board. It was done without consulting constituents inside and outside the University.

We are told that President Sullivan did not understand the problems the University faces. We see a recognized expert in higher education who fully appreciates the issues and knows how to address them.

We are told that President Sullivan did not move quickly enough. President Sullivan has had only two years. She has had to bring in a new administrative team, which has been fully in place only since last fall. We see no evidence that President Sullivan is unwilling or unable to make the necessary adjustments and lead us through necessary change.

We are told that the University must respond to a “rapidly changing and highly pressurized external environment.” We agree. But we see no sudden change in circumstances since the hiring of President Sullivan that justifies such an unexpected and disruptive removal of a popular and effective president after such a short time. Losing President Sullivan would cause unnecessary delay and hinder our ability to move the University forward.

We are told that the faculty is opposed to change. We are not. We recognize the need for change. We are ready to embrace change, so long as the form and implementation of that change follows the principles of open and honest debate that we stand here today to defend.

The problems we face cannot be resolved by sound-bites or platitudes. We must work together to solve them, drawing on our vast collective expertise. We stand ready to do just that.

Our founder, Thomas Jefferson stated:

“Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose, that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you. Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly. Encourage all your virtuous dispositions, and exercise them whenever an opportunity arises; being assured that they will gain strength by exercise, as a limb of the body does, and that exercise will make them habitual. From the practice of the purest virtue, you may be assured you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death. If ever you find yourself environed with difficulties and perplexing circumstances, out of which you are at a loss how to extricate yourself, do what is right, and be assured that that will extricate you the best out of the worst situations. Though you cannot see, when you take one step, what will be the next, yet follow truth, justice, and plain dealing, and never fear their leading you out of the labyrinth, in the easiest manner possible. . . An honest heart being the first blessing, a knowing head is the second.”

The gates of repair, repentance, renewal, and restoration are open. We hope that the Board exercises wisdom and judgment and leads us through these gates.