

The Faculty Matters Committee, The Faculty Senate

Annual Report: AY 2024-2025

Overall Mandate & Early Focus (September 2024): The FMC began the academic year discussing faculty roles and rewards, potential reforms to Promotion & Tenure (P&T) processes, and support for associate professors. The committee's early focus was on addressing faculty governance issues, evaluations, and policy suggestions (surfacing issues from the broader faculty, not personal grievances.) In September 2025, a new priority emerged early on concerning University Policy 1201 (Non-Discrimination).

University Policy 1201 (Non-Discrimination) & Academic Freedom: This became a major focus throughout the AY.

- **October 2024:** Discussions centered on an AAUP inquiry regarding recent revisions to UP 1201. It was explained that changes were made to align with state/federal law, specifically mentioning the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The FMC began examining the implications of both the policy change and the revision process on faculty academic freedom. The FMC sought and received input and clarifications from the office of the President (Janette Muir) and the Access, Compliance, and Community (ACC, formerly DEI) office (Tom Bluestein) and clarification on whether adopting the IHRA definition was legally mandated or a choice.
- **November 2024:** The FMC submitted a short report (**Appendix A**) and presented its findings to the Senate. The committee focused on the academic freedom implications and whether the administration followed proper procedure (UP 1101) during the revisions, explicitly deciding *not* to delve into the specifics of the IHRA definition itself or past changes to UP 1101. The FMC reviewed various documents, held meetings with University Counsel, the GMU Policy office, DEI, and the Student Government, and identified confusion caused by a clerical error showing two versions of UP 1101. A meeting with Tom Bluestein (DEI) confirmed the administration was open to revising UP 1201 to clarify academic freedom protections, though Bluestein noted investigations can create distrust. The FMC recommended a Senate resolution asking the administration to codify academic freedom as an exception within UP 1201. This motion was ultimately tabled for further discussion.
- **January 2025:** The FMC decided *not* to bring the previously proposed resolution on UP 1201 to the Senate floor at that time, citing the resolution passed by the Board of Visitors in December which made commitments and faculty handbook protections for academic freedom, though further discussions remained possible.

- **February 2025:** The committee began monitoring a new BOV resolution related to academic freedom and UP 1201 being taken up by the APDUC committee and assessing its implications.
- **March 2025:** The FMC announced plans to bring a *new* resolution to the next Senate meeting, addressing the board's resolution on anti-Semitism in relation to UP 1201.
- **April 2025:** A resolution regarding UP 1201 was presented (**Appendix B**). It addressed academic freedom, included language on anti-Semitism, proposed specific text changes (referencing the Office of Access Compliance), sought to extend protections to Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, South Asian, Hindu, and Palestinian communities, and aimed to include faculty involvement in cases concerning academic freedom. This resolution was put to a vote and passed (34 in favor out of 37 responses).

Faculty Evaluation of Administrators (FEA): This was another significant area of activity (**Appendix C**).

- **January 2025:** The FMC confirmed Gallup remained contracted for FEA. Issues from the previous year, particularly with chair evaluations (data discrepancies, unit types), were discussed. A recommendation was made to potentially exclude chair evaluations from the upcoming survey to allow for review, with the FMC tasked to make a final decision. Broader questions were raised about the appropriateness of evaluating chairs via this survey.
- **February 2025:** Work continued on examining the integrity of the chair evaluation data before any release.
- **March 2025:** Ongoing discussions with the Provost's office regarding the forthcoming FEA were reported.
- **April 2025:** The FEA survey administration by Gallup was scheduled for around April 15th. It was decided that chair evaluation data *would be included* in the new survey, and a communique would be issued explaining why previous chair data hadn't been shared.

In summary, the FMC spent considerable effort investigating the revision process and academic freedom implications of UP 1201, culminating in a successful Senate resolution proposing specific amendments. Simultaneously, the committee managed the Faculty Evaluation of Administrators process, addressing data integrity issues related to chair evaluations and preparing for the next survey deployment.

Responses to Questions from Faculty Senate Executive Committee

During the past calendar year has the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President (or their respective offices) announced initiatives or goals or acted upon issues that fall under the charge of your Committee? If so, was your Committee consulted by the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President in a timely manner before the announcement or action? If not, do you believe your Committee should have been consulted? Would it have been helpful to have had the input of your Committee from the outset?

- No, new initiatives or goals have not been announced that fall within our charge. Currently there is nothing that we feel that we should have been consulted about.

Did your Committee seek information or input from the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President or members of their staffs? If so, did they respond adequately and in a timely manner?

- We sought input from the office of the President and ACC office regarding our factfinding efforts on the formulation and effectuation of UP 1201 revisions in August 2024. Janet Muir (office of the President) and Tom Bluestein (ACC) have fully cooperated in answering our questions, as well as making themselves available to talk to the Senators.
- Andrew Lane and Stacey Ellis have been very helpful in providing insights into the immediate supervisors' data collected in April 2024 through the FEA survey. They worked with us to improve the FEA survey design and implementation for AY 2025.

Please suggest how you believe the President, Provost, Senior Vice President and/or their staffs might more effectively interact with your Committee in the future, if necessary.

- Provost Antony has been very accessible. We do not expect him to stay through the full length of Senate Executive Committee meetings, it might be helpful for the administration to attend those meetings in full whenever possible.

Please relate any additional information you may have regarding interactions between your Committee and the President, Provost, Senior Vice President, or their staff.

- N/A

Appendix A



Date: 11/13/2024

To: Solon Simmons, President
The Faculty Senate

From: Benoit Van Aken, Sebahattin Demirkan, Ellen Rowe, Caroline Sutter, and
Mohan Venigalla (Chair);
The Faculty Matters Committee (FMC)

Subj.: The FMC findings and recommendation on AAUP concerns on the August 2024
revisions to University Policy on Non-Discrimination (UP 1201)

Dear Professor Simmons,

This letter presents the findings and recommendation of the Faculty Matters Committee (FMC) on the implications of August 2024 revision of George Mason University (GMU)'s Non-Discrimination Policy (University Policy 1201, or UP 1201) on academic freedom at Mason. The FMC was charged with this task by you, and the FMC accepted it at the Faculty Senate meeting dated September 25, 2024. This undertaking is in reference to a memo (dated September 23, 2024) to President Washington by the GMU Chapter of American Association of University Professors (AAUP.) The AAUP memo is attached to this letter.

Of specific importance to FMC charge is the AAUP concern noted in its memo, *"We are concerned about 1) the insular processes used to revise university policy substantively and 2) the implications of these changes with regard to First Amendment protections of free speech rights and academic freedom at Mason."*

The narrow scope of the FMC charge involves whether the revisions to UP 1201 or the very process by which UP 1201 was revised infringe on academic freedom at GMU.

The FMC investigated and deliberated both the revision process and the revision itself with respect to their implications to academic freedom. The FMC investigation includes document

scrutiny, conversations with administration officials and privileged conversations with the University Counsel's office. The following are FMC findings.

1. The FMC finds that in revising UP 1201, the Policy Management Group (PMG) of GMU adhered to the procedures outlined in the 2017 version of UP 1101. It should be noted here that UP 1101 is the policy that governs all policymaking at GMU. However, the AAUP memo to the President quoted passages from the 2013 version of UP 1101, which calls for the involvement of the Faculty Senate and its leadership in policymaking, while the 2017 version does not. It was evident from our investigation that the now-defunct 2013 version and the current 2017 version of UP 1101 were mistakenly linked on the university webpages, in one case both on the same page in two places. In FMC's judgment, this clerical error may have led to the belief that UP 1101 was not followed in revising UP 1201. As we understand, the AAUP memo led the policy makers at GMU to search for, find and clean up any and all outdated policies from several GMU webpages.
2. There is no evidence that the revised UP 1201 infringes on academic freedom at GMU. In revising UP 1201, the university administration has codified what has already been the practice at GMU. That is, strict adherence to the Federal (a 2017 Presidential EO) and State (a 2023 VA Code, Chapter 471) policies. We learned, and are convinced, that the policy revision does not in any way affect the availability of exercising academic freedom as an affirmative defense for the university community against any accusations of violation of UP 1201 that may lead to adverse investigations.

Notwithstanding these findings, even though academic freedom is available as an affirmative defense, the FMC believes that there will be situations where faculty, staff and students may not be aware of their rights – especially with regards to academic freedom. Therefore, the FMC recommends to the Full Senate to vote on the following resolution and forward it to the administration should it pass:

“The Faculty Senate requests the administration to explicitly codify exercising academic freedom as one of the possible exceptions into UP 1201, just like the exception to the right to free speech has been codified currently.”

The FMC believes that codifying ‘academic freedom’ into the language in UP 1201 may not alleviate the potential distress caused to any subject due to any investigation resulting from an accusation of policy violation. However, it will certainly raise awareness that academic freedom is available as an affirmative defense.

We are happy to answer any questions you and the other Senators may have.

The Faculty Matters Committee

encl. AAUP Memo to President Washington, dated September 23, 2024

Appendix B

The Faculty Matters Committee

Proposed Draft Resolution on UP 1201.

Up for vote at the Faculty Senate Meeting, April 2, 2025

WHEREAS, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that “no individual, on the basis of race, color, national origin, shall be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination in, a Federally assisted program or activity,” and

WHEREAS, on May 7, 2024, the US Department of Education expressed concern for “students and school community members who are or are perceived because of their shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics to be Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, South Asian, Hindu, Palestinian, or any other faith or ancestry,” and

WHEREAS, the August 27, 2024 revision of University Policy 1201 does not address all such discrimination equally, and

WHEREAS, the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and examples do not by themselves provide clear guidance on distinguishing anti-Semitism from legitimate political speech and action concerning Zionism, Israel, and Palestine,

RESOLVED, That the Faculty Senate calls on President Washington to update University Policy 1201 to:

- Remove the sentence, “The ACC office will consider the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and examples (as set forth in U.S. Executive Order 13899 and Chapter 471 of the 2023 Virginia Acts of Assembly) to the extent that they might be useful as evidence of discriminatory intent, without diminishing or infringing any right protected under the Constitution and laws of the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia.”
- Replace that sentence with the passage: “The Office of Access, Compliance, and Community will take care to prevent discrimination against students and school community members who are or are perceived because of their shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics to be Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, South Asian, Hindu, Palestinian, or any other faith or ancestry, without diminishing or infringing any right protected under the Constitution and laws of the United States and the Commonwealth of Virginia. In doing so, the ACC office will consider the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism and examples, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, The Nexus Document: Understanding Antisemitism at its Nexus with Israel and Zionism, and other relevant scholarly guidelines.
- Add language to the accompanying procedure requiring the Office of Access, Compliance, and Community to consult with faculty with relevant academic expertise when academic appropriateness or academic freedom is implicated.¹

¹ This language is based on University of California, Anti-Discrimination Policy, as revised August 29, 2024.

Appendix C

Faculty Matter Committee's Update on FEA Survey for AY 2025

The Faculty Evaluation of Administrator (FEA) survey transitioned to the Gallup platform in Spring 2023. To minimize survey fatigue among faculty in Spring 2024, the Faculty Senate partnered with Human Resources the FEA with the Faculty Staff Experience Survey. Again, to minimize survey fatigue – FEA was deployed after a 10-day gap between the end of COACHE survey and FEA.

A significant addition to FEA during the Spring 2024 administration was the inclusion of "direct faculty supervisors"(In many cases they are 'department chairs') for the first time. Our objective was to provide local academic leaders with valuable feedback on faculty members' experiences within their teams. Gallup's research indicates that approximately 70% of team variance can be attributed to the direct supervisor, highlighting the profound daily impact these individuals have on employee experience. The FMC aimed to provide this crucial insight to support leadership at the departmental level.

However, the AY-24 implementation of this new component presented unforeseen challenges in efficiently and cleanly disseminating the data. These challenges included:

- **Inconsistent Supervisory Structures:** Not all colleges utilize formal faculty supervisor or department chair roles. In some instances, Deans were identified, leading to survey questions being directed accordingly.
- **Manual Data Processing:** The use of a free-text field for identifying faculty supervisors/department chairs necessitated extensive manual cross-referencing in Excel and extraction from the Gallup Access platform. The occurrence of multiple entries for the same department further compounded this labor-intensive process. The HR Faculty and Staff Engagement Team dedicated considerable time to organizing this data, providing us with a data folder requiring further sorting and review.

The FMC emphasizes that while direct faculty supervisors do not currently have direct access to the FEA feedback, a comprehensive dataset is available to supervisors who had five or more direct reports complete the Faculty and Staff Experience Survey. This dataset comprises 40 questions covering critical areas such as team culture, recognition, supervisor impact, feedback mechanisms, burnout, and well-being. For guidance on accessing this data within the Gallup Access platform, please contact the Faculty and Staff Engagement Team at [email address removed].

The FMC reiterates that all survey responses remain confidential and anonymous. The Faculty Matters Committee does not have access to individual response data.

To address the challenges encountered during the 2024 survey administration and streamline the process for the 2025 survey, the FMC is implementing the following improvements:

- **Pre-populated Supervisor Data:** The HR Faculty and Staff Engagement Team is currently building the 2025 FEA survey within the Gallup platform. They will collaborate with each college to accurately identify faculty chairs/supervisors and pre-populate this information into the survey. Faculty will be asked to select their associated college and then check a box corresponding to their direct faculty supervisor. This structured approach will enable cleaner and more efficient data reporting for colleges with this organizational structure, allowing for quicker data dissemination.
- **Enhanced Data Access Training:** Following the close of the 2025 survey, HR will provide comprehensive training to the Faculty Matters Committee on navigating and accessing the data within the Gallup Access platform.
- **Timely Data Review and Sharing:** The Faculty Matters Committee will dedicate Summer 2025 to a thorough review of the FEA survey data and anticipates sharing the key findings from with the faculty in Fall 2025.
- **Distributing Direct Supervisors (Chairs) Data:** The FMC plans to screen and cross-verify the AY-24 and AY-25 data on direct supervisors for privacy, accuracy and consistency before releasing it to faculty in Fall 2025.