



GMU TRUSTEES PLAN TO GET MORE INVOLVED PEOPLE ON, OFF CAMPUS EXPRESS SOME CONCERN

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George Mason University trustees say their decision to block the hiring of a counselor for gay students is the beginning of a plan to be more involved in the school's affairs, a course that has provoked concern among faculty, students and some Northern Virginia business leaders. The trustees caused an uproar that has yet to subside when they objected last month to a \$15,000 appropriation for the part-time counselor, thus overruling GMU President Alan G. Merten, who said they were micro-managing.

The Faculty Senate is to vote next week on an unusual measure expressing "grave concern" about the Board of Visitors' action, and the Student Senate yesterday passed a resolution accusing the board of abusing its power.

But members of the board's new conservative majority, who were appointed by Virginia Gov. George Allen (R), say their decision is part of a broad effort to make the school's administration more accountable to state taxpayers.

In the coming months, they said, they plan to examine the school's budget in detail, reevaluate admissions standards and consider consolidating the graduate and undergraduate business schools. Board Rector Marvin R. Murray said they may look for poorly attended classes that could be replaced "with courses more meaningful" to students.

The board also wants to temper liberal influences at the 25,000-student campus in Fairfax County, Murray said.

"There's been a liberal agenda on campuses for many, many years. What we're trying to do is bring the university back to the center," said Murray, who became rector in July,

when Allen's appointees took control of the 16-member panel.

Among the board's new members are former U.S. attorney general Edwin Meese III, a senior fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, and Edwin J. Feulner Jr., president of the Heritage Foundation.

The panel's activism worries many faculty and student leaders, who say they fear that board conservatives who clashed with former GMU president George W. Johnson now have the power to impose radical changes at the school.

Some Allen-appointed trustees, such as Constance Bedell, have questioned the worth of the university's close ties to Northern Virginia businesses and suggested that GMU administrators are overlooking basic education in their quest to make the school a high-technology center in the region.

"Everybody is at least disquieted about the implications of what happened," said Faculty Senate Chairman Esther Elstun, referring to the board's vote against hiring the counselor for gay students. "It's just a completely wide-open question."

The Student Senate, in its vote yesterday, called on Allen and the General Assembly to reprimand Murray and board member Joann P. DiGennaro, who took the lead in opposing the hiring of the counselor. The board said it would reconsider the issue if administrators could show there was a need for a counselor.

"If they begin meddling in the affairs as small as \$15,000, what's next?" said W. Bryan Hubbard, chairman of the Student Senate. "Higher education should never be politicized. Unfortunately, that's what's happening."

Some Northern Virginia business leaders, meanwhile, said they privately have urged Merten to resist the board's efforts to get more involved in day-to-day affairs.

If the board is perceived as pursuing a political agenda, it could harm Merten's efforts to raise millions of dollars for a GMU endowment and undermine a search to fill five vacant academic deanships, said Edward H. Bersoff, president of a technology company in Fairfax and a longtime GMU booster.

"The business community will not accept him being bullied around like this," Bersoff said of Merten. "He's got to push back into the other direction, or he's going to lose credibility."

One sign of the board's new direction is that it invited leaders of the **National Alumni Forum**, a nonprofit group based in the District, to speak at its retreat in August. The

forum, founded almost two years ago to oppose campus speech codes, is trying to persuade trustees and alumni to take a more active role in managing universities throughout the country.

"Strong trusteeship is the future," Bedell said. "What we are doing is appropriate, necessary and responsible."

Merten, who took office in July, has said that he favors consolidating some academic programs but that he is awaiting results of a study before announcing specifics. He said this week that despite the trustees' vote to block his plans to hire the counselor, he does not think they intend to interfere with his leadership.

"I'm not going to worry about it," he said. "I'm very optimistic about what we're up to."

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