Thank you for the time and opportunity to convey the faculty reactions to the recently released gift agreements.

As you likely know, faculty at Mason have raised concerns for many years about gift arrangements that might violate the spirit of academic freedom and integrity. In that time, we have received repeated assurances, from both the prior administration and current administration, that such concerns were completely unfounded. We now know that is not true.

The faculty are deeply disturbed by the recent revelations of these gift agreements. Lest anyone dismiss this reaction as simply ideological in nature, I want to highlight what our true concerns are. In no instance should a philanthropic donor to a University have any influence over academics – that includes curriculum, faculty hiring, faculty firing, and faculty or student research and scholarship. The ideology driving the influence is not what matters – academic independence, academic freedom, and academic integrity are what matter.

The recently released gift agreements clearly gave donors explicit say in faculty hiring, through membership on selection committees. They further gave donors explicit say in faculty firing, through membership on advisory boards that had the power to recommend removal of faculty members from professorships based on their review of those faculty members’ activities. Finally, some of these agreements appeared to specify individuals who were to be hired into tenured faculty positions without any competitive search, indicating that donors and the University already knew and had agreed upon pre-selected individuals.

These types of agreements are wholly unacceptable. They violate practices described in our Faculty Handbook, and they violate the basic principles of academic integrity and academic freedom.

The presence of these types of agreements also represents a violation of the public trust, given George Mason’s status as a public university. These agreements subsidize practices that are inconsistent with the academic mission that is at the heart of this University and public education at large. Moreover, the presence of these agreements exacerbates the reputation of George Mason as a university that is “for sale” to the highest bidder. We may disagree with that characterization and find it unfair, but it is clear and present in the public – and it is now further entrenched.

In addition, the faculty are concerned with other elements of these and more recent gift agreements that appear to commit university resources to supplement philanthropic dollars. These issues are present not only in the expired gift agreements that were recently released, but in other current gifts, such as the recent $5M gift to the Economics Department. There are serious questions about how temporary philanthropic support of permanent positions leads to long-term commitments of University funds that might drive the future path of the University in alignment with donor interests, rather than with the interests and strategic mission of the University.

Finally, the faculty are disappointed and frustrated by past treatment by the Administration and the Board in matters related to philanthropy. Most egregiously, prior members of the administration who insisted on multiple occasions that these types of arrangements were not in practice here at Mason were some of the actual signatories of the agreements that were recently released. That violation of
trust runs deep, and even if it was not a violation by current administrators, it will take significant time and effort to repair. More immediately, the concerns raised by faculty in recent years have been met with a lack of true consideration and repeated cavalier statements about philanthropy by members of the Administration and Board. Why was there no thorough review of procedures and agreements before now? Why were the concerns raised by faculty – concerns that have now been validated – met with indignance and platitudes, instead of meaningful investigation or action? The lack of prior response and action have yielded further ruptures in the faculty’s trust of the leaders of this institution.

I want to assure you that, although the level of concern clearly varies among faculty members, these are not extreme views held by a small minority of faculty. In my role as Faculty Senate Chair over the past 2 years, I have had the opportunity to develop a fairly broad view of issues that arise here at Mason, and I pride myself on trying to take an even-handed view of matters that arise. Even with that deep context, I, too, am disappointed and frustrated by these issues.

Having summarized the faculty concerns, I do want to acknowledge that we are now at a crucial turning point. In the past week, President Cabrera and his staff have reached out to me and the Faculty Senate multiple times to begin thinking through plans to address these issues. The President has demonstrated an openness to ideas that is refreshing, and this type of openness has the potential to lay the groundwork for a true partnership and collaboration of faculty with administration. There is much work to be done, and this will not be an easy road. Rebuilding trust will take years, not days – but it starts now. How we respond to these events will dictate the future of our University.

The Faculty Senate – and the faculty at large – stand ready to work with the Board and the Administration to begin addressing these problems, and to put in place safeguards against them. We can work together to create systems and processes that protect us against these types of violations now and in the future. We have the opportunity to forge a new, collaborative partnership of true shared governance between the administration and faculty in the decisions and actions of this University. Such collaboration in governance can help our University not only recover from these recent events, but emerge a stronger institution than we were before. I implore you all to seize this opportunity with us.

I am honored to represent the incredible faculty from all of our units here at the Mason. I am ready, willing, and eager to engage in this work not just over the coming year in my role as Faculty Senate Chair, but also afterward as one of the many Mason faculty members who devote themselves to making this institution the best educational and research institution it can be.

Thank you for your time and attention.