



To: Senate Committee on Education for the Vermont General Assembly

From: Kaitlyn Vitez, AAUP government relations officer

Date: February 16th, 2022

Subject: Testimony in support of S.248, “An act relating to the governance of the Vermont State Colleges and the University of Vermont”

Hello, thank you for having me today. I’m here to voice my strong support for Senate Bill 248, But first let me introduce myself.

My name is Kaitlyn Vitez and I work as a government relations officer for the American Association of University Professors, or the AAUP. Since its founding in 1915 by Vermont’s own John Dewey, the AAUP has been an active and influential voice in higher education. The AAUP defines and develops fundamental professional values, advances the rights of faculty, and promotes higher education for the common good. We speak for the academic profession as a whole, and more specifically, for our members across hundreds of campus-based chapters, some of which are unions and some that are nonunionized professional associations. United Academics, the UVM faculty union, is one such affiliate.

First off, shared governance of academic programs is one of the AAUP’s core values, as is our belief that faculty should have a meaningful role in university affairs and governance. Regular, free, and direct communication between faculty and the university governing board is critical for this to happen. Adding faculty-selected representatives to the board of trustees is one great way to ensure their voices are heard in decisions to authorize new academic programs and make high-level financial decisions. When other trustees are appointed to the board, we know they are bringing valuable insights from their own professional and personal histories that can make for better-informed decision making. Our colleges would not be the same without the staff that manage facilities and programming, the faculty teaching and doing research, and the students who create the vibrant campus culture that makes their school so appealing. They should be welcomed to the table to share their insights and support the board of trustees in its mission.

Second, it’s encouraging to see Vermont join the national trend of including broader representation on governing boards. Already, 8 statewide governing boards in places as different as California and Kentucky have at least one seat for faculty. This session, New Jersey and Alaska are considering similar legislation. Beyond statewide forums, many colleges have a seat for faculty on their institutional boards or other decision-making bodies. This legislation does not make Vermont a trendsetter by any means in giving employees and students a voice in university governance, but it does set a higher standard for what participation looks like.

Finally, speaking as a UVM alum, it's just the right thing to do. Given the difficult choices that university leaders have had to make during the pandemic, one would think that having representatives of important campus constituencies at the table would help build buy-in for big decisions. On issues as contentious as merging institutions, raising tuition, or eliminating academic programs, every person on campus deserves to have their voice heard through their chosen representatives. Empowering students, faculty, and staff with an opportunity to work collaboratively with university leadership to solve these thorny problems should be embraced! As it says in the UVM mission statement, we ought to prepare students (and by extension, other members of the campus community) to "be accountable leaders [with a] dedication to the community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct." This seems like a great opportunity for Vermont's public colleges to put those values and vision into practice.

Again, I urge you to vote yes on Senate Bill 248. Thank you for your time.