University of Virginia President Resigns Under Pressure From Trump Administration

The Justice Department had demanded that James E. Ryan step down in order to help resolve a civil rights investigation into the school.

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By Michael S. Schmidt and Michael C. Bender

Michael S. Schmidt and Michael C. Bender have been covering the Trump administration's clash with Harvard University and other colleges for months.

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The University of Virginia's president, James E. Ryan, has told the board overseeing the school that he will resign in the face of demands by the Trump administration that he step aside to help resolve a Justice Department inquiry into the school's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, according to three people briefed on the matter.

For the leader of one of the nation's most prominent public universities to take such an extraordinary step demonstrates President Trump's success in harnessing the investigative powers of the federal government to accomplish his administration's policy goals.

The New York Times reported on Thursday evening that the Justice Department had demanded Mr. Ryan's resignation as a condition to settle a civil rights investigation into the school's diversity practices.

In a letter sent on Thursday to the head of the board overseeing the university, Mr. Ryan said that he had planned to step down at the end of the next academic year but “given the circumstances and today’s conversations” he had decided, “with deep sadness,” to tender his resignation now, according to one of the people familiar with the matter who was briefed on the contents of the letter.

The school’s board has accepted Mr. Ryan’s resignation, according to two of the people briefed on the matter.

It was unclear when Mr. Ryan would leave his post. He said in his letter to the head of the board that his resignation could be effective immediately but “no later than Aug. 15, 2025,” according to the person briefed on the letter.



Demonstrators protesting Mr. Ryan’s resignation on the grounds of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville on Friday. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times



In a email to alumni on Friday confirming his resignation, Mr. Ryan said he was "inclined to fight for what I believe in," but that he could not "make a unilateral decision to fight the federal government in order to save my own job." Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

A spokesman for the university did not respond to a message seeking comment.The people briefed on Mr. Ryan's resignation spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Ten days ago, the Justice Department issued a stern warning to the board overseeing the University of Virginia that the school needed to act quickly. The department informed the college of multiple complaints of race-based treatment on campus, and of the government's conclusion that the use of race in admissions and other student benefits were "widespread practices throughout every component and facet of the institution."

"Time is running short, and the department's patience is wearing thin," the letter, dated June 17, said..

The letter was signed by Harmeet K. Dhillon, the head of the Justice Department's civil rights division, and Gregory W. Brown, the deputy assistant attorney general for civil rights. Both are graduates of the university and Mr. Brown, as a private lawyer, had previously sued the school. Ms. Dhillon and Mr. Ryan also overlapped during their time as students at the University of Virginia School of Law.

Some members of the school's board had pushed for Mr. Ryan's ouster, fearing that if the university failed to comply with the Justice Department's demands, the Trump administration would follow through on its threat to strip the school of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding.

Board members have also expressed concerns that under Mr. Ryan, the school had not properly dismantled the school's diversity initiatives despite a 2023 Supreme Court decision doing away with affirmative action and Mr. Trump's executive order aimed at eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion programs.



Supporters of Mr. Ryan on Friday. Board members opposing his leadership had expressed concerns that under Mr. Ryan, the school had not properly dismantled the school's diversity initiatives. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

In recent days, members of the board appointed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, had talked to senior Justice Department officials to learn what could be done to resolve the situation, and were told Mr. Ryan had to go. In response to those discussions, members of the board had been anxious to demonstrate to the Trump administration that Mr. Ryan would indeed step aside, according to one of the people familiar with the matter.

In a email sent to alumni on Friday afternoon confirming that he had resigned, Mr. Ryan said he was "inclined to fight for what I believe in," but that he could not "make a unilateral decision to fight the federal government in order to save my own job."

"To do so would not only be quixotic but appear selfish and self-centered to the hundreds of employees who would lose their jobs, the researchers who would lose their funding, and the hundreds of students who could lose financial aid or have their visas withheld," he wrote.

He was, he said, "heartbroken" to be leaving the university this way.

The University of Virginia has been considered among the top five public universities for more than two decades, according to U.S. News & World Report rankings, and has maintained that position during Mr. Ryan's tenure. This year, the Princeton Review ranked the university as the second-best value among all public colleges. Last year, Time magazine ranked the college as the fourth-best public school at producing future leaders.

Mr. Ryan, the university's ninth president, has held that post since 2018 and was unanimously approved for another contract in 2022. During his seven years in the job, Mr. Ryan developed a reputation as a champion of diversity. He encouraged community service and helped drive an increase in the number of first-generation students.



Mr. Ryan and his wife returning to their home after greeting supporters. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

He summed up his philosophy as one aimed at making the university “both great and good,” describing his goal of striving for academic excellence in a manner that would benefit society. But that rankled conservative alumni and some Republican board members, who accused him of imposing his own ethics and values on college students.

“The overt commitment to social equity clearly accelerated on Ryan’s watch,” said Jim Bacon, a journalist and conservative commentator who co-founded the Jefferson Council, a group of university alumni who have been critical of Mr. Ryan. “Pursuing social justice, as opposed to focusing on the core mission, means that instead of educating kids, he’s indoctrinating them.”

Before becoming the University of Virginia’s president in 2018, Mr. Ryan served as the dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he was praised for his commitment to D.E.I. programs. Harvard has been one of the Trump administration’s chief targets since it began its assault on higher education.

Ann Brown, a co-chairwoman of the advisory council of Wahoos4UVA — a group of students, alumni, faculty and staff committed to "viewpoint diversity and U.V.A.'s independence from political interference" — said that after The Times's report on Thursday, there had been a surge in support for Mr. Ryan.

She said that if Mr. Ryan were removed, it would be "extremely damaging" to the university.

"But this also isn't about one man," Ms. Brown, who graduated from the university in 1974 and its law school in 1977, said in a text message. "It would be a symbolic surrender of the university's autonomy and commitment to free inquiry that, if allowed to stand by the Board of Visitors and Virginia's elected officials, would send a chilling message: that public universities in Virginia serve political agendas, not the commonwealth."

Michael S. Schmidt is an investigative reporter for The Times covering Washington. His work focuses on tracking and explaining high-profile federal investigations.

Michael C. Bender is a Times political correspondent covering President Trump, the Make America Great Again movement and other federal and state elections.