

Statement by Julie Roberts to UVM Board of Trustees, September 25, 2020

At an institution of higher learning, faculty are at the forefront of the university mission. I am happy to be able to speak to you today and pleased that several of my colleagues are here as well to share some faculty perspectives in this unprecedented and tumultuous time.

There are different ways to show leadership in times of critical uncertainty such as this. Unfortunately, the current UVM administration appears to have chosen a leadership style grounded in maximum control and minimum collaboration. Opportunities for true collaboration have come minimally, reluctantly, and only under pressure. The examples are many, beginning with the 25% reduction in jobs and wages of over 70 UVM non-tenure-track faculty, lecturers who have some of the highest teaching loads and lowest salaries of UVM faculty. All but 5 of these critical teachers have been restored, but again, only after considerable activism by faculty and only after these lecturers endured months of unneeded stress at the prospect of a 25% cut in pay. Another telling indicator of the current failure of collaboration is that faculty and even many student groups never receive responses from the President or Provost. I can't tell you the number of faculty we have heard from who have written them with heartfelt and important messages and never received a reply. When we have requested to meet with upper administrators, we have been rejected. How then shall we be heard and how can we work together?

United Academics is also deeply disappointed in the process of bargaining the impacts of Covid-19 on faculty, initiated after we filed an unfair labor practice. This week we reached impasse, despite efforts for months to reach agreement on various ways to support faculty who are job insecure, those concerned for their health and safety and that of their families, and parents and caregivers. An opportunity for collaboration was lost. We hope that the presence of a federal mediator will yield a better result.

Faculty are not alone in our discontent. Many UVM staff have been greatly upset by a pay cut of up to 5% that was only marginally progressive, leaving many staff, like their lecturer colleagues, at risk for financial hardship. Second, we learned yesterday that the Vermont Cynic will be moved, again without consultation, from Student Life to the College of Arts and Sciences, where their new advisor will report directly to the dean. They and we reasonably fear a loss of autonomy and freedom of the press.

I see all of these as intimately related. They are all examples of unilateral leadership in a time when a collaborative style is more meaningful than ever. As members of the board of trustees, I urge you to exercise your roles as stewards of this university we all care so deeply about and to change course toward utilizing the talents and expertise of faculty, staff, and students in a leadership alliance. That is the way we become a community again, and that is the way we survive as an institution into the future.