

John Garvey, president of The Catholic University of America, in 2013 file photo. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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An unofficial group of faculty at the Catholic University of America has voted to declare "no confidence" in the school's president and provost, adding another dramatic chapter to a simmering dispute over cost-cutting efforts and other issues at the 131-year old institution.

According to documentation provided to Religion News Service, 65 members of an independent group of CUA educators called the Faculty Assembly voted by secret ballot early this week to express no confidence in their president, John Garvey, by a vote of 62-0, with 1 abstention. They also voted to express no confidence in provost Andrew Abela by a vote of 63-0, with 2 abstentions.

The group then launched a dayslong online survey distributed to 448 full-time and emeritus faculty at the school on the same subject, excluding those who report directly to the provost. The results of the vote, which was completed on Friday (June 1) at noon, showcased sweeping majorities siding against the two administrators: 78 percent voted no confidence in the president, and 76 percent said the same of the provost.

Only 13 percent voted to "affirm confidence" in the president (9 percent abstained), and 12 percent said they had confidence in the provost (13 percent abstained).

The online tallies were based on 225 responses, and all percentages are rounded.

A spokesperson for CUA, which was founded by Catholic bishops, did not immediately provide an official statement from the school, but noted the vote has no formal power. The Faculty Assembly is distinct from the official CUA Academic Senate, an elected body that includes 21 faculty members as well as Abela, who currently serves on the Senate's executive committee. The spokesperson also pointed out that there are only 391 full-time faculty members who are "voting-eligible" according to the school, arguing the assembly's vote included 72 additional people.

But Michael Mack, an associate professor of English at CUA, explained that while the Faculty Assembly is unofficial, it has existed in various capacities since 1965.

"Its purpose is to bring together faculty from across the university so that they can have a unified voice in matters of importance to the university," Mack, who serves on the assembly's executive committee, said in an email.

The votes follow months of brewing tensions between CUA faculty and its leadership, especially Garvey and Abela. The discontent is largely rooted in disagreements over the administration's Proposal for Academic Renewal, a cost-cutting initiative that was reportedly unveiled to faculty in early March. The plan, which sought to eliminate a $3.5 million operational deficit at the school, stoked frustration among faculty for various reasons, including a proposal that administrators eliminate 35 faculty positions through layoffs and buyouts — including the possible elimination of some tenured professors.

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Andrew Abela, provost of Catholic University of America. (RNS photo courtesy of CUA)

Outrage over the proposal and other issues eventually resulted in the creation of a website, savecatholic.com, which lists various critiques of the renewal document and claims to represent a number of current and former faculty, students and staff.

A CUA spokesperson noted the Academic Senate participated in the creation of the academic renewal document and several of the senate's recommendations were included in the final draft. The senate also voted 35-8 to in May to send the proposal

to the board of trustees for approval.

The final draft of the proposal removed the reference to tenured positions, but it's unclear whether the threat to tenured faculty remains. In the meantime, Mack says Faculty Assembly members plan on presenting the board with a list of grievances regarding the proposal and administrators early next week.

This article has been updated June 4, 8:50 a.m. CDT to clarify the number of full-time faculty at CUA, note the scope of those included in the survey, and correct that faculty who report directly to the provost were excluded from the poll, not included.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 15-28, 2018** print issue under the headline: Faculty vote raises stakes in Catholic University battle.