

REMARKS TO THE BOARD OF TRUST COMPENSATION COMMITTEE
From Janet R. Hirt, University Staff Advisory Council President: 2004-2005
May 26, 2005

It is my privilege to speak with you this morning about what is truly the heart and soul of this university for which you serve as a Board member – and that is the University Staff. Every employee at Vanderbilt who is not union eligible or is not faculty is considered staff. These employees are grouped wherein for every 30 employees there is a representative elected by the respective group members. These elected representatives form the University Staff Advisory Council.

The result is that the Council is itself and through its representation a group of diverse individuals – diverse in their responsibilities – diverse as to whether working at Vanderbilt is a job or a career – diverse in their interaction within the hierarchy of Vanderbilt life.

What though is not diverse is the love each of these individuals has for Vanderbilt. This love for Vanderbilt is most clearly seen during any Commencement week – staff giving their own time to assist in the mechanics of making The Party a successful evening experience for graduates and their family and friends – staff giving their own time to assist in handing out programs, providing directions at Senior Day and at commencement itself. This love for Vanderbilt is also apparent when we look at the number of staff employees who hold Vanderbilt degrees. Within the Council half of this year's representatives earned a baccalaureate or post baccalaureate degree from one of the Vanderbilt schools.

One of the Staff Council Representatives came to Nashville in the mid seventies to pursue a degree in art history. Once she had that master's degree in hand, she found that working in the library had not only paid the bills, but it had also given her access to many wonders. She began course by course to earn her Master's in Library Science at Peabody College. With that degree in hand she became in the mid-eighties Vanderbilt's preservation librarian and moved from non exempt to exempt status. She remains focused on one of the arteries of knowledge – and that is assuring that the library collection survives for future generations to explore. Often faculty book lovers track her down to find out how they can preserve their own treasures.

Another Council Representative is a network engineer who served as the Staff Council president in 2000-2001. At his desk in ITS all campus wireless efforts converge. He came to Vanderbilt in the mid nineties. In 2001, he received the Master of Liberal Arts & Science degree at Vanderbilt. Now his energy is full circle with activity in the Nashville Vanderbilt alumni group. He is also a DJ at the campus radio station, hosting a Sunday morning show filled with electronic music. The father of two daughters who are within college view, he is active with the parents group at their school of Hume Fogg and of course looking forward to his girls using the Vanderbilt tuition benefit.

Another Representative is the Assistant Manager at HealthPlus —the Vanderbilt faculty and staff wellness program. As a Belmont student in 1991, he interned at Vanderbilt; then returned in 1995 as a full time employee. His passion for fitness and wellness is evident in his chosen vocation, but more than that is his dedication to promote healthy lifestyle practices within Vanderbilt employees here in the Vanderbilt workplace and at their homes. In December I wanted each Council Representative to receive a token holiday gift when they left the December Meeting. I telephoned him, asking if HealthPlus would give me sixty pedometers. He said they were out, but if I didn't need them right away, he would get them. I asked him if he could get them for February so that each Council Representative would leave the February meeting with a Valentine. No problem, he said and in mid January he emailed me that the pedometers were waiting my pick up. He is the father of twins, but he is so committed to Vanderbilt well being that he comes on his own time if necessary to see that employees meet the deadline for Go for the Gold actions. He comes to council meetings eager to reinforce for all of us the fact that each of us must be concerned about our own lifestyle and its impact upon our health.

Also a Representative is the program coordinator of one of the law school publications. This is a woman of whom the faculty advisor to the student publication wrote "students love her, respect her, and follow her direction." One student editor-in-chief commented "she never lets us down. She has the respect of all the students who work with her." This is a woman who from her first day at the law school in 1980 to today impresses everyone through her loyalty and enduring spirit of service. In 1980, she was hired as a "word processor operator" – hard to believe now that word processing was considered a specialized skill. But what I want you to know is that this woman grew with technology, always moving forward long before the acronym IT was in our consciousness, much less the notion of information technology.

These individuals are representative of staff who give their talents to Vanderbilt well being. They are also representative of staff that uses the benefit of working at Vanderbilt to promote Vanderbilt as well as their own well being.

This is a group in which I am privileged to be a part. This is a unique experience for me as this is the first employment of my adult life in academia where I am not faculty or administration. In my adult life outside of academia, I was an attorney – a member of what before I came to Vanderbilt I called the last of the aristocracies. I tell you this because as you know from the most recent staff survey, there is on the part of the staff a feeling of not being recognized as partners in the school's mission. Let me hasten to say that I am not talking about governance as the charter of the institution is clear as to governance that it rests with the chancellor and the faculty.

This then is the heart of what I want us to consider – and that is the delicate balance of interests of students – faculty – staff. These three threads weave together to be the fabric of Vanderbilt.

Each thread is strong only because it is reinforced by the other two threads. What you see as you walk the Vanderbilt campus – what you read as authored by Vanderbilt faculty

– what you enjoy at Vanderbilt events – what you believe makes a Vanderbilt education unique – is all possible because of the efforts, talents, intellect, dedication of staff.

But the staff thread often appears to be the stronger thread – the one reinforcing the silk thread of the faculty and the fine cashmere thread of the students. We see and hear about first class students, first class faculty – and indeed much wooing is done to obtain such faculty – but rarely do we hear about first class staff. We hear about comparison with top twenty schools for faculty. We hear about comparison with the local community for staff. We hear it is difficult to recruit and retain top faculty; so incentives are increased. We seem content to believe either local talent is sufficient for staff or if we need to offer more it is to a select administrative group. Part of this may be because it appears that the staff is encumbered by the arch of Vanderbilt while the faculty is unique through their affiliation with a specific school. Part of this may be because the formal education of the staff is so diverse; while that of the faculty is constant with formal degrees. Part of this may be because the staff service varies so greatly and the faculty hold in common classroom settings and dissemination of ideas. Part of this may be that the centralization/decentralization structure of Vanderbilt University and its school components allows greater flexibility when it comes to staff matters.

Nonetheless what the staff sense is a lack of respect for who they are, what they do, and their vitalness to Vanderbilt's success.

There is of course an effort to show corporate appreciation through the activities of September Employee Appreciation month, the December Turkey Toss, and the May Nashville Symphony Concert on the Lawn.

This past year we all – faculty and staff – benefited from the alliance with Metro Transit. Being able to take the bus by showing one's Vanderbilt ID both showed the staff that Vanderbilt is a concerned member of the community and an employer who provides employees an alternative to parking expenditures and time spent behind the wheel driving.

Now we ask that serious consideration be given to extending to all of the campus the Vanderbilt Valet service. This service provided through ErrandSolutions would indicate that all Vanderbilt employees balance work and home life and often need help with simple routine obligations of living.

This past year a long standing concern of the staff was addressed though the offering of an optional short term disability plan. Although the plan fails those with pre-existing conditions, and although the plan premiums are high, the plan nonetheless is an offering filling a void.

This past year the Silver phase of Go for the Gold was implemented. This program promotes the obvious that each of us must take responsibility for maintaining an optimum healthy life style. This is a beginning and we would ask for further exploration into benefits that help both employer and employee in the realization of a culture of wellness at Vanderbilt.

Staff are not robots – or machines – or canvass upon which the stars of faculty rest – staff truly are the heart and soul of the University. It is important that they work not just in a culture of wellness, but also in an atmosphere of respect. We need to remember that if each of the threads is neither quality nor complimentary that the result will not be what we envisioned. You as a Board direct those administrative weavers. All I ask is that you balance well the competing interests of students, faculty, and staff so that the resulting entwinement is worthy of the Vanderbilt logo.