

Address to Board of Trust Human Resources Committee
Wednesday, June 16, 2004 at 1:00 p.m.
Melissa Wocher, 2003-2004 President, University Staff Advisory Council

Thank you Chancellor Gee, Chairman Hall and members of the Committee for inviting me to speak to this prestigious group. I am honored and grateful for the privilege.

I served as the President of the University Staff Advisory Council (or USAC for short) during the 2003-2004 academic year. We are a group of 85 elected representatives, serving 31 groups from across University Central. We represent nearly 3000 people from Vice Chancellor to lab assistant. Our purpose, as stated in our bylaws, is "to act as an advisory group to both administration and staff on problems and policies that affect the University and the people it serves; to establish and maintain communication between University staff and administration on all levels; and, to establish and maintain effective communication among staff of the University." The Staff Advisory Council (and our counterpart in the Medical Center) meets once a month to discuss issues of importance, from new HR policies to events such as Commencement.

In my "day job" I work very closely with faculty members and with University leaders. I don't often get the opportunity to meet staff outside of a handful of offices within Kirkland Hall and the College of Arts and Science. USAC gave me the chance to meet people that I would otherwise never have had the opportunity to meet from areas as diverse as Police and Security, Dining Services and Information Technology Services. My most common observation is how lucky Vanderbilt University is to have such a diverse set of people working here. The generosity of spirit and time that I encountered from our staff members is amazing. Never was I disappointed when I put out an email asking for volunteers for activities as different as giving blood to working an information table at Commencement. Usually the number of volunteers outweighed the number needed. Indeed, this generosity is a resource which needs to be called upon more often. I often heard the comment that we as staff members want to be involved - not only in the "fun" stuff - but also in helping out the Vanderbilt and Nashville communities through volunteerism, through service on committees and task forces, or simply by learning more about the ways in which we can improve our skills and opportunities here at Vanderbilt. The most common reason given for not getting involved was lack of information about the opportunities available.

This leads me to the Staff Advisory Council's greatest goal and our biggest challenge: communication. Webster defines communication as "transmitting information, thought or feeling so that it is satisfactorily received or understood." Opportunities for understanding information, thoughts or feelings occur in all aspects of being a member of the Vanderbilt community. However, our very size and scope can often hinder a comprehensive system of communication and common knowledge. The Medical Center hears about new policies or opportunities in one way - usually through a mass email announcement sent to employees (faculty and staff alike) and/or through articles in the *Reporter*. In University Central there is no systematic dissemination of information. Sometimes we hear through the *Register*, sometimes we receive information in the mail and on occasion we receive an email notification. More often than not, most of the staff hear about changes in policy or opportunities such as free skin cancer screenings only through the Staff Advisory Council or through word of mouth. All of us, working together, must seize the opportunity to establish a more systematic way of communicating and of acquiring knowledge.

I would like to mention two opportunities for the Staff Advisory Council and University leaders to work together in improving the sharing of information:

- **HR policy implementation.** Vanderbilt is a dynamic institution constantly moving forward and developing new policy. The staff most affected by new HR policies and procedures, as well as the supervisors who must administer them, often hear of the HR changes through the grapevine rather than some formal system of communication. This leads to arbitrary decisions based upon the supervisor or staff member's recollection of their last look at the Vanderbilt Policies and Procedures website. Better, clearer, more accessible use of our websites is one way we can share information and avoid giving hearsay and misinformation superiority over actual policy. As we allocate resources we need to be mindful that placing information in the knowledge stream – and keeping the information current – is a vitally important partner to policy development and expansion of benefits. I urge your committee to charge all of us to work together to develop a systematic way to announce new policies as they are introduced. One way to share information effectively is through the consistent use of e-mail providing the name of a new or revised human resource policy, its effective date and a corresponding web address. Focus groups composed of leaders in areas with less access to electronic information could be charged with developing others. To be truly effective in its mission the staff councils must have access to policy changes well in advance of wider communication to the staff population.
- **Community Engagement and Cohesiveness.** I like to call this a “One-Vanderbilt” initiative. We’ve got enormous room for improvement in communicating volunteer opportunities, institutional initiatives, and even perks to University Central employees. We hear from our colleagues in the Medical Center that information is forthcoming almost daily about free or reduced-price tickets to cultural events, health promotion opportunities, community needs, and staff fund-raisers such as the Needles and Pins crafts fair. We’d like to join our colleagues in the Medical Center as they partner with Habitat for Humanity, or with Hospital Hospitality House, and countless other service projects available to those of us “in the know.” We’ve got a good tool to push information in the subscriber-based Community Calendar (university-calendar@vanderbilt.edu) but we need to do a better job of letting everyone know about it. The few naysayers who cry “spam” when confronted with information overload can opt out of such tools, especially if we do a better job on the front end of separating mission-critical knowledge from simply edifying information, and letting our community know how we share each form. I’m confident that we - Chancellor Gee, the Trustees, and those of us who join you on Vanderbilt’s continuing path to distinction - will find great benefit in maximizing our strategic use of our abundant communication tools.

It’s been a rare privilege for me, especially over the past year, to converse with University leaders and see firsthand how they share ideas and knowledge and build policy with these raw materials. Among staff, here’s how we share information: Staff Advisory Council members gather knowledge in meetings and funnel this information to constituents through a listserv. We post meeting minutes on the USAC website. And yes, we talk around coffee pots and water coolers and as we work out at HealthPlus.

I would like to end with a few successful communication tools we have used in the University Staff Advisory Council:

- **Our conversations with Chancellor Gee and Associate Vice Chancellor Kevin Myatt.** Chancellor Gee visits our meetings usually twice a year and is open and accessible to our questions. Associate Vice Chancellor Kevin Myatt comes to all of our meetings and is almost always called upon by the Council to clarify an issue. He has been honest with us in sharing his goals, **your goals**, for Human Resources at Vanderbilt and in sharing what's possible now and what we still need to strive for.
- **The University Staff Advisory Council regularly sends forward to the administration recommendations on policy issues of particular concern to the staff.**
- **Six Council representatives and two staff volunteers (along with approximately fifty other Vanderbilt employees) participated in Vanderbilt's first Day on the Hill - an outreach program sponsored by the Office of Community, Neighborhood and Government Relations.**
- **The Council mustered volunteers** for Employee Celebration Month, the Tailgate Party, HealthPlus activities, the Turkey Toss, and the concert two nights before Commencement.
- This year, for the first time in two or three years, **the Council was asked to nominate representatives to appropriate University Standing Committees.** This opportunity is essential in allowing the Staff Advisory Council to act in its role in advising leaders and stakeholders (and here I quote USAC by-laws) "on the problems and policies that affect the University and the people it serves." I sent forward nominations to five University standing committees and I look forward to the Council's service in these areas.

As I reflect upon my year as the President of the University Staff Advisory Council, the challenges and triumphs, I realize that we reap what we sow in our journey together at Vanderbilt. Staff must be challenged and engaged, and leaders must create a place where staff can thrive in our common goals of discovery, learning, and sharing knowledge.

I am grateful for the time you have given me today. In listening to our stories, you honor me, but more importantly you honor the "hearts and minds" I've had the privilege to represent over the last year. Thank you very much.