

Remarks to the Board of Trust

From Jason Hunt, University Staff Advisory Council President: 2008-2009
November 21, 2008

Members of the Board of Trust, Vanderbilt Administrators and Distinguished Guests, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you today. I am here to represent the Staff as the University Staff Advisory Council President. It has been my honor to serve on the council for the past three years; the last two as an officer.

I am pleased to note that attendance at our meetings has been at record levels and the restructuring of our committees and changes to our bylaws have aided in increasing our structure and effectiveness. This year, the Council decided to focus on ways to increase the overall atmosphere on campus. These have included a focus on community and increasing communication with our constituencies. We reinstated a commitment to raise money for the Employee Assistance Program and Faculty/Staff Hardship fund. This program provides small grants of up to \$500 for employees who are experiencing a short-term financial difficulty. We recently held a bake sale, which raised \$800 for this worthy program. Through the generosity of the Faculty and Staff fringe benefits committee, these funds were doubled. As you might imagine, the economy has been a factor in the increasing demand on this program. Unfortunately, many of our staff families are having a difficult time making ends meet.

Troubled economic times can cause anxiety at all levels of an organization. We must continue to work to contain and limit the anxiety that surfaces at Vanderbilt. No matter how many times they are reassured, most employees still have some worry that their next day at Vanderbilt may be their last. This might not seem rational but these are people who are watching their friends and family get laid-off and it is a natural reaction to imagine you might be next. This is why, as an institution, we must remember that even the tiniest of actions can invite rumor and speculation. We must continue to operate in an open, transparent

manner and it is as important as ever that everyone have access to rationale and results of institutional changes.

Vanderbilt is an exceptional institution. It is unique in Tennessee and can only be compared to a handful of Universities across the country. Vanderbilt's reputation as an outstanding and progressive employer has attracted and retained some of the most talented employees this nation has to offer. A primary reason top talent is attracted to Vanderbilt is that we are often out-in-front when it comes to employee benefits. However, even in the toughest economy we cannot rest on our laurels and allow the benefits we offer to stagnate. We certainly can't afford to blindly freeze benefit enhancements only to be forced to play catch-up once the economy rebounds. The staff council recently proposed 2 additional bereavement days be granted for the loss of immediate family members. The realities of today's world mean that families are scattered across the globe and often times the current three-day limit is inadequate. Had I not taken personal time to supplement my bereavement leave earlier this year when my grandfather died I would have barely been able to attend the funeral out of state, much less attend to and assist my family with arrangements. This story is not uncommon and not every employee can afford the extra time off. The cost of adding 2 additional bereavement days is \$1.45 million per year, a number that sounds large but barely scratches the surface of our institutional budget. When the administration chose not to act on our request for additional days it cited a survey that stated 70% of employers only offered up to three days for bereavement leave. I was not convinced by this rationale. I am used to working at a Vanderbilt that proudly sits in the top tier of everything it does. I urge the institution to revisit the bereavement issue in the future. The economy may be flat and money may be tight but this gesture from the University to its employees would go miles towards reassuring them of your commitment.

On a personal note, I want to commend the Board and Vanderbilt's Administration for its commitment to diversity. I cannot express how lucky I feel to work at a place where I can be out as a gay man and bring my partner to social functions. I am also thankful for Vanderbilt's Domestic Partner coverage that has

allowed my partner to obtain exceptional healthcare. Because of its progressive policies Vanderbilt probably employs more leaders in the LGBT community than any other organization in Tennessee. Vanderbilt's continued commitment to equality, from gender identity inclusion to the new KC Potter Center, has had a profound effect on staff, students, and faculty. We have gained talented people in all three of those areas who might have otherwise ended up at another institution.

I am not exaggerating when I say that I am proud to work at Vanderbilt. I feel fortunate to live in a community that is greatly enhanced by my employer's presence. I feel fortunate to have a cadre of co-workers who care about their fellow staff members as well as their jobs. I feel fortunate to have a Chancellor that I *know* cares as much about his employees as he does fundraising for the University. Things are going to become increasingly more difficult and a family as large as ours will always have its disagreements; but I genuinely believe that we are all committed to the success of Vanderbilt and each other.

Thank you.