

April 23, 2010

Members of the Board of Trust, Vanderbilt administrators and distinguished guests, I am honored to have this opportunity to address you today.

The University Staff Advisory Council held its first meeting more than twenty years ago. As perhaps you know, the Council represents all employees, outside the Medical Center, who are in non-faculty, non-union positions. It is made up of more than 90 elected individuals, chosen by 30 campus groups, from hourly workers to professional administrators and technical specialists. More than 3,000 staff members are represented.

The Council, as its name implies, is advisory. It has no legislative power, no bargaining power, it may simply bring issues that concern employees to the attention of the administration. Conversely, the Council hears from entities of the administration and other areas of the university to improve understanding of the university's goals and mission and to improve the efficiency and well-being of staff. The representatives pass along what they learn in Council meetings to their constituents. The Council's role is thus two-fold, to provide a means of communication between university and staff and between staff and university administration.

To fulfill our function in educating ourselves about the University, its many activities, and our role in it, we have speakers at our monthly meetings. As president this year, I chose to explore the presence and influence of Vanderbilt in the community, city, nation, and even the world.

For example, we have learned about the impact of the Kennedy Center on the lives of many families in Middle Tennessee who have children with developmental delays and of the hope brought to people across the country through the scope of the research done there.

We have seen how Vanderbilt University Theatre and the Blair School of Music serve as the face of the university to many in our community with their excellent programs of dramatic and musical performances.

The Office of Neighborhood, Community, and Government Relations, in representing the University's interests, has impressed us by projecting our image as a concerned and responsible partner in our city.

Last week, Vice-Chancellor Balser gave us a remarkable look at health care reform and the implications and opportunities for Vanderbilt and, most notable, Vanderbilt's position as a leader in reform and improved patient care.

Recalling, then, our two-fold role, one might ask, in addition to providing information to employees about many aspects of the University, what exactly has been accomplished on behalf of the staff, what issues have been addressed.

With very little success in the recent past in bringing the Staff's concerns to the attention of the administration, the Council decided to confront an issue for which there was some real hope of a positive outcome, that of bereavement leave, leave that effects only a few employees in any given year.

Research on the number of days allowed by other universities led to a request for an increase from three days to five. The proposal argued that because families are often separated by considerable distances, the current three day bereavement leave does not allow sufficient time for travel over any significant distance with time remaining to complete plans for memorials, arrangements for survivors, review of financial issues, and some few moments for reflection and consolation. Unfortunately, the challenges of the economic downturn put an end to this discussion.

The Council's general stance is rather than fight losing battles, to turn our attention to improving the lives of staff members in other ways. The Council has a long history of responding to calls for volunteers at the Tailgate events beginning the football season, for Employee Celebration, for Red Cross blood drives. Last year, we held two successful bake sales to benefit the Employee Hardship Fund, only to find that we were violating an HR policy regarding solicitation and the sale of food and would not be allowed to have such sales in the future. We have been seeking approval for a succession of fundraising proposals with only one encouraging result. We are now allowed to use a Kroger program that gives a small return on grocery purchases, which we then pass on to the Hardship Fund.

As a more visible venture, last spring we undertook a Habitat project and were successful in building a house for a Vanderbilt employee. This was a very rewarding experience for those of us who got to know the recipient and other co-workers as we worked side-by-side.

At the present, we are in the process of establishing a relationship with Hands-on-Nashville as a way to facilitate volunteer efforts among Vanderbilt staff members. Again, the projects will not only benefit others, but will allow employees to build relationships with their fellows.

These efforts are important, for it is difficult to pretend any relevance for the Council, if we cannot give the members a sense of being useful in some way. Every year we lose some members who express their frustration at having no means by which to accomplish anything. But I continue to believe that the Council occupies an important niche between administration and staff and we will work to find ways to keep the Council vibrant.

In closing, I want to mention the support Vanderbilt's employees gave to the university's mission during the difficult financial times we experienced last year. The Council was heartened at the outset of the fiscal challenge by the decision to cut budgets in order to avoid lay-offs. This approach strengthened the staff's dedication to Vanderbilt despite the personal sacrifice of a pay raise. Many times I heard it repeated that staff members were happy to do their part since we were all in this together.

