

University Staff Advisory Council:
Board of Trust Address, Spring 2021

Good morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the University Staff Advisory Council, also known as USAC. My name is Caroline Johnston and I currently work as Director, Alumni Relations in DAR, a team I have been a part of for 5.5 years.

Over the past year, it has been my honor to serve as President of USAC. While it has been far from traditional, there are many points of partnership, progress and pride for USAC and staff as a whole.

To share a little more about the Council:

- Act as an **advisory group to the university**, focused on issues that affect Vanderbilt and those served by the Council.
- We work **across the university's administration and staff community** to resolve problems, develop policies and advance best practices.
- We are comprised of **102 members across 20 groups this year**, which represent all areas of staff in non-union roles across the university.

At the direction of our bylaws, every five years USAC undertakes a review of our council makeup – making FY21 a year of review. **This review, or reapportionment, is critical to ensuring that staff representation is equitable and groups are comprised of aligned offices and divisions.** With staffing level changes around the university in late FY20, and early FY21 this seemed a particularly relevant year to review our council makeup.

- Our reapportionment resulted in changes across 11 groups – with about half seeing changes to their representation level. Meaning, losses or gains will occur.
- The remaining half saw their groups combing to reflect better alignment of teams and divisions.
- Depending on the affected group, changes will take place either this spring or next through the election process.

USAC has **five committees**, which play an integral role in our work. These committees are focused on:

- Communications / Events / Membership / Rule and Administration / Staff Life

University Staff Advisory Council:

Board of Trust Address, Spring 2021

We also have an **Ad Hoc Committee focused on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**. This group is dedicated to creating a culture of inclusive collaboration, and to supporting all of our professional and support staff members—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age or disability.

I'm delighted to share that this committee, which has operated in Ad Hoc status for two years, will join our standing committees beginning July 1.

I will share more a little more about some of our committee-based initiatives in a moment.

In addition to the work of our committees, USAC continues to support the **Employee Hardship Fund through Kroger's Community Rewards program**.

- This fund is available to any full-time employee who is experiencing a temporary hardship. It is administered through **EAP/Work Life Connections**.
- During the 2020 fiscal year, more than \$4,300 was awarded to employees in need and just over \$6,200 was raised.
- Funds are raised by connecting Kroger cards to the Vanderbilt Employee Assistance Fund, and a portion of purchases support the fund.
- As you can imagine, prior to the launch of the university's COVID-19 support fund, this was an excellent resource for the many staff in need.

To kick off our year, Chancellor Diermeier and I had the pleasure of meeting – albeit virtually – on our first days on the job. I was immediately impressed with his commitment to staff, and I want to thank the Chancellor who has made staff a priority in his short time with us.

- USAC is proud to collaborate with the Chancellor's office on a new initiative – Staff Assemblies. These opportunities for us to come together, formally, twice a year, as staff members is especially meaningful as many of us continue to work remotely.
- These gatherings allow for reflection, celebration and honoring colleagues
- This has been a challenging year for staff, both personally and professionally, but we remain **united by our values and our culture**.

University Staff Advisory Council:
Board of Trust Address, Spring 2021

A focus early in the year for USAC was the observance of **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Juneteenth** as paid holidays. This summer, our EDI committee developed a proposal which was approved by the council, and submitted to university leadership for consideration.

- Given Vanderbilt's continued efforts surrounding equity, diversity and inclusion, we believed it was critical that our staff members were able to participate in events on these days.
- This MLK Jr. Day observance is also an opportunity to reflect on themes of equality and perseverance, and the many ways that Dr. King impacted our lives for the better.
- Early this fall, the Council was happy to learn that Chancellor Diermeier partially accepted our proposal – creating MLK Jr. Day as a paid staff holiday. This would not have been possible without advocacy and support from Vice Chancellors Kopstain and Churchwell.
- As a result of this progress, staff were able to participate in the many virtual community opportunities and in the future we look forward to having staff participate in the many in person observance and service activities planned that day.

USAC is also collaborating closely with Dr. Churchwell and the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion on the **Heritage Calendar project**.

- To begin, our Equity, Diversity and Inclusion committee selected the subjects to honor with visual posters around campus. To date, this has included World Religion Day, Black History Month, and Women's History Month.
- Future efforts aim to include special events to coincide with monthly recognition.

Our **Events Committee** has also been hard at work to foster community, and support it.

- Early on, the committee identified a desire amongst staff to gather virtually – outside of meetings – for casual conversation and networking opportunities. The committee developed bi-monthly Coffee Breaks which are open to all staff.

-

University Staff Advisory Council:

Board of Trust Address, Spring 2021

- Next up, the committee was tasked with re-thinking a longstanding USAC tradition – our annual food drive in support of Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle TN
- We knew it was important to find a solution - Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, one in six adults—and one in five children—struggle with hunger each day in Middle Tennessee. Second Harvest has experienced a startling increase in need, and more people than ever are using the food bank’s resources for the first time.
- I’m pleased to share that our final tally was over \$5300 and 21,000 meals for families in need.

This fall, our **Staff Life Committee** finalized their professional development proposal which received approval from the council.

- Such efforts are critical to **ensuring that every staff member can reach his or her full potential**—as employees and as people.
- This proposal dovetailed with the newly formed Employee Learning and Organizational Effectiveness team that was developed in Human Resources’.
- We are already seeing aspects of our proposal being threaded into their work and offerings and look forward to continued partnership on professional development opportunities.

As my council year winds down, I find myself reflecting on the global and societal challenges we have faced in the last year. Set alongside the successes for USAC this year, I’m in constant awe of the resiliency and commitment of staff to all facets of Vanderbilt.

I remain ever confident in the ability of USAC to make a difference in the lives of our staff members.

Thank you for your time today.