

*Virginia Featherston, manager of financial services in the Accounting Office, said short-term disability is a key concern of the University Staff Advisory Council, which has appointed a committee to consider options such as the creation of a sick leave bank to provide a way to protect staff members during times of crisis [Vanderbilt Register, May 3-9, 1999, p. 2].*

*The full text of Featherston's address follows:*

**ADDRESS TO THE VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY BOARD OF TRUST  
Saturday, April 24, 1999  
Virginia Featherston, President, University Staff Advisory Council**

Chairman Hall, Chancellor Wyatt, members of the Board of Trust, and distinguished guests:

Good morning. As President of the University Staff Advisory Council, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to convey to you what the staff members at Vanderbilt have been discussing during this past year and to bring to your attention our concerns and ideas.

The University Staff Advisory Council is comprised of 66 elected representatives and alternates from over 2,200 staff members who support the academic, administrative, and auxiliary areas of the University.

The primary purpose of the Council, as our name states, is to act as an advisory group to both administration and staff on problems and policies that affect the University and the people it services.

The Council is also 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 Council uses various methods to accomplish our purposes. One way we have to provide staff input is the opportunity to make nominations for staff members to serve on various University-wide committees and advisory boards. During this past year I have made nominations for staff members to serve on the Women's Center Advisory Board, the Vanderbilt United Way Community Giving Allocation Committee, the HealthPlus Advisory Board, the Community Affairs Board, the Traffic and Parking Committee, and the Staff/Faculty Hardship Fund Committee. A brief comment about the Hardship Fund. The Staff/Faculty Hardship Fund Committee was started six years ago by the joint efforts of the University and Medical Center Staff Advisory

Councils and the Employee Assistance Program in Human Resource Services. EAP identified the need for a program to provide assistance to staff and faculty members experiencing temporary financial difficulties arising from hardships due to illness, a death in the family or other emergency situations. The Committee is 100% volunteer labor, and all funds come from gifts from staff and faculty members, the Staff Advisory Councils, and the Vanderbilt Community Giving Campaign. I am completing a three-year term on this committee in June.

The Council's main avenue of communication between staff and administration is our monthly meetings. During this past year the Council has heard presentations from Training and Organizational Development updating the progress of the development of a training class for supervisors, a request the Council made two years ago. In January we heard about the new Severe Weather Warning System. We were informed about the changes occurring in Security. As a result of the meeting with Security, the Council's e-mail list is one distribution point for security alerts. Just this month the Council heard Lauren Brisky, Associate Vice-chancellor for Finance, provide an update on the Vanderbilt Integrated Applications, PeopleSoft, and Y2K compliance. In June, Chancellor Wyatt will address the Council. Chancellor Wyatt's comments have become an annual tradition that all look forward to hearing. We have also heard about the programs offered by HealthPlus, the new telecommunications system, and the goals and strategies for success of Vanderbilt athletics.

In years past, it may have appeared that the main topic for discussion of the Council was Parking. While the cost of parking is, and I am sure will continue to be, a concern of staff members, over the past several years the focus of the Council and staff members has shifted to human resource policies and benefits. Associate Vice-Chancellor Darlene Lewis is an ex-officio member of the Council and attends the monthly meetings. This year she or her staff have discussed with the Council the changing of the Martin Luther King, Jr./Presidents Day holiday and birthday holiday to personal days, the effective dates of annual salary increases, the payroll system conversion to PeopleSoft, the new mandatory retirement plan, and revised or new Human Resource policies and procedures. These include a revised vacation policy, a revised holiday policy, a new bridging policy, a revised education assistance programs policy, and a revised medical and personal leave of absence policy.

Another very important way the Council acts in an advisory capacity is in the formation of *ad hoc* committees. This year two committees were active. The first is the Committee on Special Events, created in February, 1999, the

committee is looking at the special events given for staff including Service Awards, the Tailgate Party, the Symphony on the Lawn performance, and the Holiday celebration. The committee was formed at the request of Ms. Lewis, and so far we have learned that the staff has strong and varying opinions regarding the Holiday celebration and that the Symphony on the Lawn performance should continue. A complete report should be available before summer end. The other committee submitted its final report to the administration in December, 1998. The committee, the Joint University and Medical Center Staff Advisory Councils Ad Hoc Committee on Paid Time Off Policy at Vanderbilt, made three (3) recommendations: First, that no conversion should be made to a Paid Time Off structure from the current sick/vacation policies, due to the success of the current system and difficulty in converting accrued leave; second, that a sick bank should be created to provide a low cost mechanism to protect staff members in the event of short-term disability; and finally, that policies should be reviewed to determine a standard method for handling the day after Thanksgiving across departments.

At the core of the recommendations is the critical, (and currently unfulfilled), need to provide staff members with a safety net in the event of short-term disability. This has been a concern for staff members and the Staff Advisory Councils, both University and Medical Center, for over three (3) years. All indications are that the high cost of short-term disability insurance, coupled with the University's desire to maintain 'cost neutrality' in the benefits program provided to staff members is the driving factor for omitting this much needed and requested benefit. Because of this, the Committee determined that the best option, from the staff member's perspective would be either a low-cost or a no-cost short-term disability insurance plan or a sick bank. And from the overall perspective of both the staff members and the University, a sick bank would be the preferred option for providing an affordable safety net against short-term disability. With a sick bank, staff members would contribute the sick days to the bank and the University would contribute the cost of administering the bank. Equal partners in providing the benefit. The current status of the Committees recommendation is that the idea has not been explored enough and is still under consideration.

The administration is currently looking at proposals to modify the existing benefits program with a flexible benefits plan, commonly called a cafeteria plan. The proposed menu of the plan includes short-term disability insurance that staff members may purchase, but at full cost. To help reduce the actual dollar contribution for the insurance, staff members may have the option of "cashing in" one or two personal days. These are not new paid days off, but

were converted from existing holidays and/or floating days. But even using both personal days, most staff members will still be paying for more than 50% of the premium cost of the insurance. Whether using 100% staff members contributions or "cashing in" personal days, the staff member will be paying 100% of the cost, thus making it an opportunity to purchase insurance, and not a benefit or equal partnership in providing a benefit. Both staff councils believe that either option, a sick bank or insurance, would be greatly appreciated by all staff members, but not with staff members being burdened with 100% of the cost. The staff member and the University should be equal partners in sharing the cost of providing this much needed and requested benefit.

Vanderbilt University staff members are the supporting foundation that help the faculty and students to excel in academics, research, and patient care. Providing benefits to recruit and retain quality staff should be viewed as an investment in fulfilling the goals and purposes of the University.

The quality of the people at Vanderbilt, the student body, the faculty members, and the staff, are what determines the success of the University. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century draws near and we enter a new millennium, the Staff Advisory Council is confident that Vanderbilt University and its people will continue to be a leader in higher education.

Thank you for your time and attention.