

## Report and Recommendations of the Follow-Up Committee

March 1, 2003

Over the past ten years, the Vanderbilt administration has taken a number of initiatives designed to improve the quality of work life for Vanderbilt employees. We applaud the administration for these efforts, made in consultation with members of the staff council, which include the following:

- Ability to opt out of Vanderbilt health insurance
- Additional staff for the Employee Assistance Program
- Creation of the committee on special events and continuation of four annual events (Nashville Symphony performance, tailgate party, service awards, holiday celebration)
- Representation on the Human Resources commission
- Expansion of child care facilities
- Inclusion of university central staff in the staff opinion survey

We have no doubt that such measures as these have already increased, and will continue to promote employee well-being, as well as staff recruitment and retention.

The mandate of our committee, however, does not extend to a detailed consideration of these initiatives. We were charged with following up on previous years' recommendations of the staff council, and determining where progress remains to be made on those recommendations.

Following are the issues which the University Staff Council has brought to the administration's attention since 1996.

### **Short-term Disability:**

The ad-hoc committee on staff benefits, which was a joint effort of the University and Medical Center Staff Councils, pointed out in June 1996 that Vanderbilt was "in the bottom quartile" of comparable employers surveyed in its provisions for short-term disability. Noting that it would take a staff member several years to accrue enough sick leave to last through the six-month waiting period for long-term disability benefits, this committee recommended that Vanderbilt institute short-term disability insurance.

Another joint committee of the two staff councils, charged with evaluating Vanderbilt's paid time off policy in comparison with other institutions, in October 1998 repeated the call for short-term disability coverage. Fearing, however, the costs of short-term disability insurance, the 1998 committee preferred the creation of a "sick bank," in which employees would donate unused sick days to a general pool which members could draw on in case of disability.

Asked by our committee why a sick bank had not been implemented, Human Resources replied that the administrative costs had been deemed prohibitive, but did not respond to our request for an estimate of those costs.

#### **Educational Benefits:**

The 1996 committee recommended that Vanderbilt increase its commitment to staff professional development by paying tuition for courses that staff members might take. Specifically, it proposed that tuition for job-related courses be fully paid by Vanderbilt. In return, employees would commit to a definite period of continued service to the University.

A 2001 resolution on staff career development again called for increased tuition assistance. A committee called the Education Benefit Committee, which included members of the Staff Council, studied the issue and, in September 2001, recommended a 70% tuition reimbursement for up to two courses per semester. In December 2001, the administration announced that it would reimburse up to 70% of tuition for one course of any kind per semester, taken at an accredited institution with the approval of a supervisor.

#### **Retirement:**

The 1996 committee expressed concern that not all staff members could afford the level of contribution to the 403(b) plans, which was then set at 5%. In response, this threshold for mandatory contribution was lowered to 3%. The committee also recommended that certain perquisites, such as library privileges and discounted athletic tickets, be offered to retirees. Continuing health coverage was not mentioned.

#### **Holidays:**

The 1996 committee, observing that Vanderbilt fell in the bottom quartile of the employers it surveyed in terms of the number of paid holidays, recommended that new holidays be added. The 1998 paid time off committee made no such sweeping recommendation, suggesting only that the day after Thanksgiving be studied as a possible additional holiday. In 1998, the staff council also expressed concern that a personal day had been substituted for Presidents' Day and Martin Luther King Day. Previously, staff had been expected to take a paid holiday on one of those two days.

#### **Career Development:**

The University Staff Council in 2001, in addition to suggesting increased tuition assistance for staff, proposed creating "career ladders" for all VU jobs; streamlining job reclassification; facilitating internal transfers; increasing commitment to in-house training; making career counseling more widely available; and standardizing performance evaluations throughout the University. Then-HR Director Darlene Lewis responded with a memo detailing initiatives which were proposed, or already under way, to address these concerns. These included the creation of a Training Council; creation of a work group to look at the reclassification issue; the addition of a one-day "Clerical Seminar" for staff career education; and making management training, to promote quality of work life and staff retention, mandatory.

The Clerical Seminar came to pass this year. Other initiatives were placed on hold prior to the arrival of the new Chief Human Resource Officer.

### **Traffic and Parking:**

Last year, the University Staff Council passed a recommendation on traffic and parking which called for monthly meetings of the Traffic and Parking Committee, with the participation of parking decision-makers, and for the improvement of communication between the Traffic and Parking Department and the Council. Specifically, the Staff Council requested information on the numbers of parking spaces lost by construction or reallocation, and explanations when the recommendations of the University Traffic and Parking Committee are not implemented.

Last December 5, a memorandum from Vice Chancellor Lauren Brisky and Associate Vice Chancellor Nim Chinniah reported on progress towards these goals. This memorandum promised that information on the inventory of parking spaces would be revealed at the December meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee. It expressed concern about increased information-sharing, however, as follows: "it would clearly be unreasonable to think that every operating decision made would be subject to democratic review or public scrutiny."

The December meeting of the Traffic and Parking Committee was postponed until January, at which time the promised statistics were released. We are grateful and trust that this climate of openness in the sharing of information will continue.

### **Our recommendations**

We offer the following recommendations for the staff council to consider, and offer our explanation for these proposals below each resolution.

#### Recommendation 1: Sick Bank

The staff council again recommends the implementation of a sick bank as the most economical solution to the serious need for short-term disability coverage. We request a detailed evaluation from Human Resource Services of the sick bank proposal (and/or other short-term disability options) prior to the January 2004 staff council meeting.

#### *Justification for Recommendation 1*

The extreme hardship to which VU staff members are liable in the event of short-term disability make this an issue which can no longer be postponed. Indeed, the Medical Center Staff Council has recently named short-term disability as its first priority.

We, too, are concerned about the costs of short-term disability, both to the University and to staff members, who would undoubtedly have to pay a portion of the premium for short-term disability insurance. We see a sick bank as a proven low-cost alternative to such coverage. The State of

Tennessee, for example, created a Sick Leave Bank in 1989. Almost 18,000 state employees out of 45,000 have voluntarily enrolled in the Sick Bank. Each employee contributes four accrued sick days at the time of enrollment. The Tennessee Sick Bank has remained solvent for the last thirteen years with an additional annual donation of only one sick day by each member. In fact, this additional assessment was waived in the year 2001. Fewer than 400 employees draw from the bank on the average each year, and the program is administered by only two employees, each of whom carries out other duties besides the sick bank.

Given this low administrative commitment on the part of a huge employer like the state of Tennessee, we believe that the benefits of a sick bank to employees, and to staff recruitment and retention, would far outweigh the administrative costs to Vanderbilt. We invite the University to provide specific information regarding the costs of the program.

#### Recommendation 2: Request for Further Study

The University Staff Council recommends that the University Benefits Committee, as well as the new Human Resources Commission, to be chaired by Chief Human Resource Officer Kevin Myatt, study and report on the following issues:

- 1) full tuition reimbursement for job-related courses taken by staff members;
- 2) competitive paid time off;
- 3) a more transparent and equitable system of classification and compensation;
- 4) and the recommendations on staff career development made by the Council in 2001.

#### *Justification for Resolution 2*

Recruitment and retention of staff are of paramount importance to the University's mission. Retention is a persistent problem at the University. A January 2002 benchmark study done by the Segal Company for the Quality of Work Life Task Force revealed, for example, that 60% of the nurses at the Medical Center have five or fewer years of service, and only 6% of nurses are over 55 years of age. Non-retention of staff can be seriously detrimental to the quality of service provided by University Central and the Medical Center.

The 2001 University Central Staff Survey showed that staff are contented with many elements of their work environments. But, as HR noted in its presentation on the survey, "opportunities exist in the areas of pay, empowerment, promotions and training." Vanderbilt employees reported greater dissatisfaction with wages and pay equity than the control groups. And there were several "low performance/high importance" items having to do with career development.

All of the issues mentioned in this recommendation should be considered as a whole, as a part of the comprehensive re-evaluation of human resources at Vanderbilt for which the Chancellor has called. Career development programs, for example, might actually hurt retention of staff, unless they are implemented in conjunction with definite career paths.

Similarly, wellness programming will not help recruitment and retention if staff members do not have enough time, in the form of holidays, flexible scheduling, etc. to take advantage of those programs. Examination of the websites of comparable universities reveals that Vanderbilt lags behind most of them in terms of paid holidays and personal days.

### Recommendation 3: Communication

Staff advisory council recommends that university administrators accept the President's invitation to report to the Council on progress toward implementing staff council recommendations, at or before the Council's October meeting each year.

#### *Justification for Recommendation 3*

Another low performance/high importance item reported in the staff survey has to do with trust. Only 38% of staff members in University Central agreed that "there is a climate of trust in the University."

This is indeed a puzzling anomaly, when so many staff members showed themselves to be well satisfied in many other areas. But we believe this lack of trust is a reality which hampers the University in carrying out its mission. Why else would your committee have had such a hard time obtaining the most basic information on issues of importance to the constituents of the Staff Council?

Non-response by Vanderbilt administrators to the Staff Council's requests for information destroys trust and raises questions and suspicions. We find this style of secrecy doubly mysterious, because we firmly believe that the Vanderbilt administration has absolutely nothing to hide, and nothing to lose by disclosing information of interest to staff.

We would like to take this opportunity to reassure the administration as to our intentions in seeking such information. There is probably no one on the staff council who would welcome "democratic review" of administration policies. Many of us are also in positions of responsibility and understand the need for freedom of action on the part of administrators.

What we want is not democracy but collegiality. Staff do not expect that all decisions be made by consensus, but we do request that we be consulted on, and informed about, matters which are properly our concern and that directly affect our work lives. This is truly an issue of "open and fear-free communication," one that will reap great dividends to the University in terms of retention of staff and motivation to serve. Our recommendation is meant as a modest contribution toward the "climate of trust" which all staff, including the administration, earnestly desire.

Your committee wishes to thank Marilyn Holmes and Jay Groves of the Quality of Work Life Task Force, Bettye Ferguson of the Medical Center Staff Council, and Terrie Spetalnick for graciously assisting our endeavors.

Respectfully submitted,

the Follow-Up Committee of the University Staff Council

Becky Atack  
Janet Hirt  
Scott McDermott, chair  
and one other member