The past few months have been challenging for University staff as the University Benefits Advisory Council (UBAC) began their review and discussion of the projected long term impact of post-retirement medical benefits on the University’s budget. Whether you have been here for a few years or even forty, it has been distressing for many to think that any of their retirement benefits may change. We recognize the need for this change and we have listened to the concerns of many staff and retirees. The Staff Council office and I have reviewed each comment we received. The major themes that emerge from these comments and concerns are:

- We would like staff to be grandfathered into a plan based on our date of hire. Changes to benefits should impact future hires, not current staff.
- There is fear, worry, and anxiety about our security after retirement.
- We feel there should be flexibility in any changes, in consideration of years of service to UVM.
- We feel the promise of benefits should not be broken.
- Some staff members feel they cannot trust the information related in discussions and the evaluation process that has been underway.
- We have an awareness of local industry experiences that in some cases, reinforces the distrust.
- We would like to remind the administration to remember benefits as a way to keep UVM competitive so we can recruit top quality staff & faculty.
- We want the same benefits for all – represented or non-represented – from the President on down.
- We acknowledge the responsibility for maintaining our own health & wellness, and we participate in wellness events when provided opportunities to do so, but there are always unexpected illnesses and accidents for which we rely on health insurance.

These concerns are very real and must be taken seriously for staff to feel confident in whatever decisions are made by our administration. Staff Council has felt that the UBAC’s review process has been open, transparent, and extremely attentive to the needs and concerns of staff and retirees. We also know that any change can be unsettling to an organization. Large scale change cannot happen in isolation, and we hope that this process illustrated the importance for change to be well communicated and planned.

The review of post-retirement medical benefits has shown Staff Council how varied the needs of staff are depending on their age, identity, career path, family make-up and many other factors. Understanding the diversity of the nearly 2,000 non-represented staff employees is essential for our organization to effectively advocate on their behalf. Our recent retreat stressed Staff Council’s need to better survey staff in order to know what issues impact their experiences at UVM. Our retreat also encouraged our representatives to put forth ideas to help address continued concerns around compensation and parking as well as ways to celebrate our 40th anniversary in 2011. Staff Council is committed to doing the best we can for each and every employee. We hope that others will join us in our efforts to make UVM a great place to work.
President Fogel, Interim Provost Knodell, Board of Trustees Chair Cioffi, members of the Board and UVM community members. It’s an honor to be addressing you in my first year as President of UVM’s Staff Council. The Staff Council is strong right now. The fine work of Vice President Michelle Smith, Immediate Past President Beth Walsh, the 30 elected representatives from all areas of the University, as well as our excellent guidance from the Staff Council office, can be seen throughout the university. Our daily work lies in defining best practices, surveying staff to evaluate how we meet their needs, organizing social events like the annual holiday bazaar, and discussing ways to celebrate staff as Staff Council marks our 40th anniversary in 2011. But our most important work lies in responding to and speaking on behalf of the concerns of staff who we represent.

Later today, President Fogel will provide an update on the status of the Post-Retirement Medical Benefits discussions. In my report, I have outlined the major themes that represent the concerns staff have communicated to Staff Council and to the University Benefits Advisory Council. Staff members want to have confidence in the decisions made by administration, especially in light of greater transparency and inclusion of staff in decision making processes. We genuinely appreciate the efforts from senior administrators to include Staff Council in their planning. However, some staff still have lingering memories of layoffs and recent financial troubles, challenging the notion of whether or not we’re all in this together.

And we are all in this together. UVM is looking for ways to continue to be a strong and prosperous institution. As employees, we are seeking that same thing. Some employees no doubt are finding themselves on the hurting edge of an upside down mortgage. Others learned about stock losses the hard way -- in their retirement accounts. Many of us want nothing more than security -- and opportunities to be strong and prosperous too.

All staff members should feel valued, rewarded, and respected for their contributions. There should be opportunities for personal and professional development in every step of their careers. There should be an atmosphere of acceptance, teamwork, and trust in the University and the administration.

UVM’s Staff Council will work diligently this year to advocate for the protection of the valuable benefits that UVM employees rely upon. We will vigorously support the vitality of UVM’s budget. And we’ll also vigorously support security for ourselves and our families. We look forward to assisting in the efforts to meet both of these goals. Thank you.