May 8, 2012

To: The University of Vermont Board of Trustees
Deborah McAneny, Chair, Trustees’ Budget, Finance and Investment Committee
John Bramley, Interim President
E. Thomas Sullivan, President-Elect
Jane Knodell, Provost and Senior Vice President
Richard Cate, Vice President for Finance and Administration
Gary Derr, Vice President for Executive Operations
Barbara Johnson, Associate Vice President of Human Resource Services
Ted Winfield, Associate Vice President for Budget and Resource Management

From: Ida Russin, Staff Council President
Michelle Smith, Staff Council Vice President
Rodman Cory, Chair, Staff Council Compensation, Benefits and Budget Committee
Mark Galen Hall, Vice-Chair, Staff Council Compensation, Benefits and Budget Committee

Re: Report of the Staff Council on Compensation, Benefits and Budget

Introduction

On July 1, 2011 the Staff Council instituted a new committee structure that redistributed work from several smaller groups to four larger committees. As a result, one committee is now charged with broad responsibility for speaking to the needs and interests of non-represented staff in the areas of Compensation, Benefits, and Budget. This letter is an attempt to briefly speak to these three key areas in a way that is similar to what we have done in the past with salary recommendations.

Budget

We are pleased by the downward adjustment of the tuition rate increase for FY13 and are grateful that the Administration is seriously seeking out ways to keep costs contained and find additional revenue streams. We count ourselves among those who hope that the University might improve its position as an attractive place to study from an economical perspective. Staff have shared many cost saving ideas in the past, and the Staff Council stands ready to participate in any and all conversations around the topics of efficiency and effectiveness.

We wish to acknowledge the hard work of many across the University to deliver a balanced budget to the Trustees this year. We recognize that this has not been an easy undertaking and we are proud of the contributions that staff and administrators have made in helping the University achieve a balanced budget. We also wish to acknowledge our sense that the entire budgeting process seems to have grown more straightforward and transparent—and we are grateful for this long-awaited development.
Benefits

We wish to express our appreciation for what remains a generous benefit package—which continues to make The University of Vermont an attractive employer. We recognize the value of our total compensation, and acknowledge that our benefits play an important role in allowing the University to hire and retain so many high-quality employees—especially in this resource-constrained environment. In this time when institutions are seeking to save money, we applaud the Administration’s commitment to invest resources in the non-salary elements of compensation and trust that the Institution’s decision makers will continue to understand the importance of benefits for this community.

In thinking about one particular aspect of our benefits package—the cost of retiree healthcare—we acknowledge the business necessity of the difficult decisions that have been made, but we also recognize through continuing conversations with staff that many long-term employees are feeling as though promises have been broken. It is our strong sense that this needs to be addressed. Likewise, the communication process around the final decision(s) has led to a diminished sense of trust on the part of staff, especially for those who were close to retirement. We know that difficult decisions well-communicated can become somewhat easier to accept, and we are hopeful that communication in the future might be more clear and more timely.

Compensation

The currently-proposed 2% raise for staff is greatly appreciated—especially for those employees who earn more than $75,000 and have not received a raise in three years. We are cognizant, however, that it represents a loss of expendable income, since the recent 0% increases have meant that wages have not kept pace with the cost of living. Vermont is a wonderful place to live, but housing costs are higher than in many other parts of the country, and many of us are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet in the midst of rising food and energy prices. In spite of this, we are grateful that the budget proposal is for an across-the-board increase for all non-represented staff, and we encourage the Administration to remember the sacrifice made by our University community during these lean times.

Recommendations

While we applaud the desire to seek out cost savings through improved efficiency, we strongly encourage the Administration to temper that pursuit with concern for human capacity and worklife balance. We are greatly concerned about the capacity issues that are coming to light in many areas across campus, and we encourage the Administration to work closely with Human Resource Services to conscientiously address appropriate staffing levels, make careful provision for worklife balance, and speak to concerns about equity between departments.

While we acknowledge that performance evaluations have become a topic of formal conversation at the University, we encourage the Administration to move forward quickly to make annual, standardized performance evaluations mandatory for all employees. We wholeheartedly support such evaluations (preferably administered by trained supervisors), believing that they will lead to increasingly fair and equitable treatment of all employees, that they are indispensable for professional development, and that they will open the door for merit-based salary increases for hard-working, high-performing staff in the future.

While we recognize that a decision-making process that involves the community in meaningful discussion and seeks to arrive at consensus is difficult and time-consuming, we believe that this has been an essential part of the UVM culture for a great many years. We are hopeful that those serving at the highest levels of the Institution will continue to value this aspect of our culture and strive to create space for it to blossom.

Cc: Eric Hoefel, Staff Representative on Trustees’ Budget, Finance and Investment Committee
From: John Bramley, Interim President

To: Ida Russin, President, Staff Council
    Michelle Smith, Vice President, Staff Council
    Rodman Cory, Chair, Staff Council Compensation, Benefits and Budget Committee
    Mark Galen Hall, Vice-Chair, Staff Council Compensation, Benefits and Budget Committee

RE: Staff Council Report on Compensation, Benefits and Budget

I am writing on behalf of the other recipients of your May 8, 2012 memorandum regarding the Staff Council’s Report on Compensation, Benefits and Budget (attached) I want to express our appreciation for the Staff Council’s thoughtful and thorough analysis and report.

Throughout this year, the considerate and reflective advice we have received from Staff Council has shaped University policy on multiple fronts. Your engagement in the Strategic Initiative Process is especially acknowledged and appreciated. As you rightly conclude, a decision-making process that involves the community is essential. While this type of process may require additional time and commitment on the part of decision-makers, it consistently leads to a richer and more meaningful outcome. Further, this type of deliberative and engaging process supports the culture that we all value and share and have strived to sustain and nurture over the years.

We believe that collectively we will resolve the issues in a way that assures the long term success and continuing advance of the University. I will be sharing your report with others in the administration asking that they consider your observations and recommendations and to explore implementation strategies in their respective areas. Thank you again for your well considered and professional recommendations.

Cc: University of Vermont Board of Trustees
    Thomas Sullivan, President-Elect
    Jane Knodell, Provost and Senior Vice President
    Richard Cate, Vice President for Finance and Administration
    Ted Winfield, Associate Vice President for Budget and Resource Management
    Barbara Johnson, Associate Vice President for Human Resources
    Gary Derr, Chief of Staff