May 7, 2013

To:         Tom Sullivan, President
            Robert Cioffi, Board of Trustees Chair
            Bob Low, Interim Provost and Senior Vice President
            Gary Derr, Vice President for Executive Operations
            Richard Cate, Vice President for Finance and Administration
            Wanda Heading-Grant, Chief Diversity Officer
            Barbara Johnson, Associate Vice President of Human Resource Services

From:       Catherine Symans, Staff Council President
            Renee Berteau, Staff Council Vice President

Re:         Annual Update from Staff Council

In an effort to better communicate with the Administration, the Board of Trustees, and the wider UVM community, Staff Council created an Annual Update in 2012 to highlight the significant accomplishments of the past year, speak to a number of ongoing efforts, and address areas of concern to non-represented staff. As we reflect upon the current challenges and opportunities facing the University of Vermont, we wish to continue this communication by expressing our thinking under three main headings: words of appreciation, areas for focus and improvement, and thoughts on moving forward.

Words of Appreciation

Through the Staff Council, non-represented staff have enjoyed regular access to key administrators and an increased role in decision-making processes. We wish to acknowledge that we have been entrusted with consistent and high-level participation in the governance process of the University community and express our sense that both we and the community are richer for it.

The 2.9% proposed raise for staff is a welcomed proposition, and though many of us continue to find it difficult to make ends meet in the midst of a continual rise in food and energy prices, we are grateful that the budget proposal is for a fixed across-the-board increase for all non-represented staff. We also wish to express our appreciation for a generous benefits package, including tuition remission, that continues to make the University of Vermont an attractive employer. We also acknowledge the efforts to make salary increases and benefits consistent among all employees.

We also voice our sincere appreciation for:

The Senior Vice President and Provost Search Process

We are grateful for the transparency and broad participation that characterized the entire search process. This process—in which the Staff Council played an important role—was welcomed by staff and serves as a model for shared decision-making.
UVM Community Annual Holiday Party

We appreciate the effort of President Sullivan to continue the tradition begun by Interim President Bramley to gather faculty and staff together in a relaxed atmosphere outside the work environment to build a sense of community among all University employees.

University Communication

We appreciate that work continues on the challenge of improving internal communication at UVM and look forward to the future development of other communication initiatives that will provide the UVM community with information in a more consistent and transparent manner.

Areas for Focus and Improvement

Staff Morale, Respect and Value

We have been greatly concerned about staff morale since the impact of the economic downturn led to layoffs in 2009. Since that time, we have heard again and again that some staff feel undervalued or underappreciated in their roles at UVM and that this may be related to poor supervision and leadership. The recent unionizing efforts in the fall of 2012 highlighted how some staff feel that the only way to rectify these concerns, specifically those regarding salary and supervision, is through union organizing. While Staff Council has no opinion or position on the unionizing efforts of staff, we have identified that the lack of action in the past by UVM leaders to address the concerns of staff related to conditions of their employment has led many staff to believe that their needs are not considered important enough to warrant focused attention from the Administration. Addressing issues regarding equitable pay, good supervision, annual performance appraisals, accountability, and so on, are key to staff feeling invested, respected and valued in the work they perform.

Workforce Capacity Issues

We acknowledge that there are areas where the University can save money through restructuring and the reorganization of work. We remain optimistic about the recently announced reorganization of the Division of Finance and Enterprise Services, though in the future we will hope for a more carefully thought-out and affirming communication plan related to organizational change than what the community experienced in this instance.

We also recognize that there are many areas of the institution already experiencing significant workforce capacity issues, with fewer people being asked to do more work. In this kind of environment, strategic work is often left undone, staff have little or no time for important professional development, and individuals suffer more frequent burnout and other health problems. We believe a serious capacity issue exists that needs focused attention, and in light of ongoing budgetary constraints, we fear that future spending cuts will further complicate the current situation.

Staff and Faculty Relations

We continue to support leadership that seeks equity between staff and faculty in ways that are appropriate and inclusive. We encourage the scheduling of community-building events and the creation of initiatives to break down the walls that in some parts of the University divide staff from faculty in ways that are not healthy for the community or affirming for individuals. It is important that both the President and Provost lead our institution in thinking of ourselves as one community.
Areas of Concern

A Reasonable Provision for Parental Leave for Staff

We strongly support the creation of more childcare facilities on campus and we continue to encourage the Administration to consider and investigate a paid parental leave program (maternity and paternity) for all employees—not just for faculty. While unlimited accrual of sick time has been the model for addressing this kind of leave, those employees having children may not have significant accrued time to take.

Nursing Mother Facilities

Related to parental leave, we recognize the need for space for nursing mothers to have a place that is both private and comfortable to express milk for their nursing child during the workday. The Staff Council has worked with Human Resource Services to find ways to address concerns around space, accessibility, and education of our community. As a result, we made a formal recommendation on May 7, 2013 that was aimed at solving the most pressing concerns regarding space in the Waterman Building and continuing a larger discussion on the needs of nursing mothers within our community and among those who visit UVM.

Better Management of Change through Communication

One of the most frequent critiques of change on campus is that communication in the past has often appeared to be an afterthought. While there are situations where timely communication may not be possible or appropriate, we recognize the need for additional improvements to internal communications even while we appreciate the efforts that have been made to address these concerns.

Communication regarding the FY14 budget reductions is one example in the recent past where the dissemination of information from senior leaders to various units or colleges created a situation where some staff were receiving notice while others were not, ultimately leading to misinformation and misunderstanding. Similarly, staff continue to read important University news in the Burlington Free Press before we receive it internally. Both major and minor changes must be communicated to the University community consistently in order to encourage a culture of transparency, openness, engagement and trust. Furthermore, we recognize the need for communication both in the good times as well as when our community needs to rally together to address various University issues, areas of concern, or initiatives.

We are encouraged by the promise to have a more strategic discussion about internal communication with senior leaders in the summer of 2013. We look forward to that conversation and the hope of future improvements.

The Expectation of Standardized Performance Appraisals for All Staff

The majority of staff agree that undergoing annual performance appraisals would allow for benchmarking professional growth, provide the necessary data to support merit pay, and support better communication between staff and their supervisors. The University can no longer shy away from establishing a system of accountability for these efforts. We understand that work is underway to create systems that will help establish better tracking and more accountability in the future, but more emphasis on the importance of performance appraisals and training is needed in order to sustain what may be a large cultural shift in some areas of the University.

The Expectation of Supervisory Training

We acknowledge that many supervisors end up in their positions due to their subject knowledge or their length of service, not their ability to manage employees. We believe that required supervisory training
coupled with continual professional development will result in a healthier work environment for everyone. This is especially true for faculty members who may need additional guidance in managing others. We must make it an expectation and requirement that managers have training to serve in their roles and that we build a culture of respect for one another.

Professional Development and Implementation of a Career Path Program

Staff often have difficulty understanding what career progression would look like in their personal context and would greatly appreciate assistance in this area of professional development. We acknowledge the Administration’s stated commitment to professional development (EDU@UVM, HRS Learning Services, The Center for Teaching and Learning, tuition remission, etc.) even as we recognize that this area requires ongoing attention. It is important for staff to understand how they can advance their careers at UVM through educational opportunities, in order to maintain a knowledgeable workforce that is invested in the University.

We have often heard that staff cannot take advantage of professional development opportunities and recently discovered that some supervisors may be arbitrarily denying the use of this benefit to their staff. This knowledge led to a discussion with Human Resource Services to include clarifying language about this important benefit in the Staff Handbook so that staff would have a way to address the unreasonable denial or misinterpretation of this benefit.

Safe Space for All Individuals

We are encouraged by the efforts of Chief Diversity Officer Wanda Heading-Grant to lead our community in Comprehensive Diversity Professional Development. We look forward to the implementation of such a program in the near future so as to nurture and support a community that is grounded in a sense of caring so that all persons might feel welcomed, valued, and respected.

Tobacco Free University Initiative

We are encouraged by the initiative to promote a healthy University community through ongoing discussions around tobacco use at UVM. Staff Council looks forward to playing a role with this initiative by continuing to promote dialogue and transparency so that the needs of smokers and non-smokers alike are addressed in a respectful and considerate manner.

The Voice of Post-Docs at UVM

We recognize the need for Post-Docs at UVM to have a greater voice at the institution so that the unique issues facing this important constituency can be addressed. Due to the way UVM categorizes Post-Docs as either Associates or Fellows/Trainees, it is not clear whether these individuals are more aligned with staff, faculty, or graduate students. As a result, it is difficult to discern which established governance body should respond to the concerns of this group. Staff Council believes more work needs to be done to engage and communicate with Post-Docs so that this group is recognized, heard and better integrated into the UVM community. We believe that the concerns of Post-Docs deserve serious consideration from the Administration especially at this critical point as our institution works to reach new academic and research goals where the number of Post-Docs and their role at UVM could expand significantly.

Thoughts on Moving Forward

Staff Council has experienced an expanded role in decision-making processes. We appreciate this development, believing that it not only highlights the important contributions staff make at all levels of the University, but it sends a message that staff are valued. We contend that staff morale will continue to improve as we are routinely invited to participate in all processes that affect the UVM community, and believe that the dialogue that flows from such inclusion will do much to build trust and confidence in University leadership.
We cannot emphasize enough the importance of frequent and clear communication—and not just in times of difficulty. We understand that it is not simply what is communicated by the Administration, but how and when it is communicated that matters. We also recognize that the UVM community is often told what, but not why and thus we emphasize the importance of large decisions being given proper context and historical background so that they are better understood by each of us.

While we readily affirm the primacy of the faculty to the educational enterprise, we also recognize that many staff would be considered “professionals” outside this higher education establishment and have similar, if not the same, degrees. We encourage a commitment to a socially just community where faculty and staff can serve shoulder to shoulder without reference to the categories that sometimes divide and separate us. We believe that it would revolutionize the morale of staff and their sense of place in the community we all value if we begin to dismantle the barriers that foster an “us versus them” mentality and set the tone that all of us, staff, faculty, students, post-docs, Administration, and so on all contribute to UVM’s distinction.

As we have indicated, we are appreciative of the many positive developments and promising initiatives at the University. We also have our share of concerns (the greatest of which we have itemized above), but we have a positive outlook for the future of this Institution. We are grateful for an Administration that listens and seeks to really hear, and we look forward to continuing to serve together with you in the years ahead. Our dream is that together we might work to move the University of Vermont forward as we strive to become the kind of place that honors and fulfills our mission and meets not only the needs of staff, but also the needs of the entire University community and beyond.