Staff Council Annual Update

June 1, 2016

INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth Staff Council Annual Update, a yearly publication established to better communicate Staff Council’s activities and ongoing efforts to our stakeholders in the wider University community. Staff Council remains integral to the University of Vermont’s shared governance process and we are grateful for the continuing support of and successful collaborations with our many University partners to improve working life for staff. This year was focused on making progress on initiatives developed from our March and April 2015 outreach efforts. Each of our standing committees and our Executive Board were assigned objectives relating to the themes of Salary Equity, Benefits, Professional Development/Career Path, Inclusive Decision Making, and Institutional Integrity and Respect. March 2016 marks 45 years of Staff Council’s striving for these goals at the University of Vermont.

This update is not intended to be a full compendium of every Staff Council initiative that took place during the 2015-2016 academic year, but will instead reflect the current major objectives of the Council as well as some updates regarding all non-represented staff at the University.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT STAFF COUNCIL SURVEY, 2016

The following data represents a few selected highlights from preliminary analyses of the 2016 Staff Council Survey. A record 896 staff members participated in this year’s survey, 48% of all UVM non-represented staff. A comprehensive summary of these results will be available this summer.

- **Staff are most concerned about annual salary increases**, with 76.9% of respondents indicating this as their item of highest or second highest concern. The most common concerns about this year’s increase included [a] lack of parity with represented groups on campus, which (according to the input received) was expected based on previous University communications, [b] confusion about the procedures surrounding merit increases, and [c] frustration with the amount of the overall increase pool (both the 1% across-the-board raise and the maximum 1.5% merit raise, which many staff members do not consider sufficient to inspire outstanding performance).

- Behind **health insurance**, many staff rate **tuition remission** among their most important benefits and 57.5% have utilized it in some way.

- 75.9% of respondents have taken advantage of **professional development opportunities** at some point during the last two years. This includes both external conferences and trainings as well as UVM’s internal offerings. With this high level of staff engagement in development, it is no surprise that **development of Career Path opportunities** continues to be reflected this year as a prominent concern of many staff members.

- When asked about potential benefits they would utilize if available, the most common responses were “**short-term disability**” and/or “**parental leave separate from sick time**.”
STAFF COUNCIL LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES AND COLLABORATIONS

Faculty Supervisory Training: President Renee Berteau and Vice President Johanna Brabham have worked extensively this year on laying a foundation for making supervisory training more accessible for faculty. Many faculty members who supervise staff have little training on how to do so effectively, and numerous faculty report that current University supervisory trainings offerings are difficult to attend for a variety of reasons. Staff Council leadership has begun to identify these barriers, together with numerous University partners including the President of the Faculty Senate. We hope to make recommendations to facilitate more accessible training for faculty supervisors. Our goal is for all University staff have access to stable and effective supervision.

Vision Statement: Staff Council partnered with Tara Messier of Professional Development & Training to facilitate an iterative process to develop a vision statement reflecting the Council’s goals. The final statement is:

Staff Council is a representative resource and advocate for positive change for staff at UVM through engagement, communication and collaboration with university leadership. We strive to build an empowered community and a positive and equitable work environment.

Grievance Policy Revision: Staff Council leadership partnered with Human Resource Services to develop an updated and improved grievance policy, the “Grievance & Peer Advisor Policy.” This updated policy, currently in its final review stage, addresses many staff concerns about the previous grievance policy. It also provides for the development of a group of Peer Advisors who will undergo specialized training to support and counsel employees in need at the University (not just in the course of grievance proceedings, but also in many other situations).

Partnership with Parking & Transportation: The Staff Council Executive Board and the Staff Council Office assisted Parking & Transportation in developing an outreach initiative for soliciting staff feedback in altering certain parking policies. The Council is very grateful for the opportunity to include staff feedback directly in such process revision, as parking is a frequently mentioned concern in our own outreach initiatives.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (PPD)

Recent initiatives: In June 2013, the Council put forth a recommendation to University administration calling for improvement in the performance appraisal process. Since that communication went out, the Personal and Professional Development Committee has spearheaded that initiative. Earlier this year, they formed a working group to examine best practices for performance review forms in a data collection process including both national and local benchmarks. This report was submitted to HRDMA for consideration in development of the new form. The Council was very pleased that HRDMA accepted many of the Committee’s recommendations for improving the performance review process. The PPD Committee is also pleased with the President’s expectation that all staff at the University will receive a performance review this year.

Looking forward: While the PPD committee is pleased that HRDMA took our recommendations for performance appraisal processes into consideration during the planning cycle, there is concern that the committee was not
aware the form was finalized prior to general distribution for use. Collaboration processes are continually refined, and we are committed to using this as a learning opportunity to build final reviews into distribution of forms like these.

Integral to the performance review process are updated position descriptions that accurately articulate the role and responsibility of a position. There are concerns that position descriptions for many staff are inaccessible, outdated and do not recognize additions to individual workloads. Having accurate position descriptions is a daunting task, but one we hope can be incorporated into the new performance appraisal process.

The Personal and Professional Development Committee will continue to collect feedback on the new performance review form and monitor the status of position description access and updates. We will communicate successes and concerns to HRDMA.

It is important to train supervisors to engage in discussions about performance. At the same time, it is important to help employees better understand how the process works and their individual responsibilities and rights within that process. The Art and Practice of Effective Performance Reviews classes offered by Professional Development and Training have been well attended and will continue to be offered on an ongoing basis. The Personal and Professional Development Committee will continue to collect feedback on the newly offered class and communicate this to HRDMA.

The Personal and Professional Development Committee is also responding to a popular staff request: increased availability of professional development funds. Staff Council is committed to working toward every staff member at the University having increased access to such funding. A longstanding proposal has been the development of a central professional development pool to which employees without regular access to professional development funding could apply for paid sponsorship to professional development events, classes, and certifications. In FY17, the Committee will spearhead a feasibility study to investigate how such pools are handled at other institutions and, if applicable, develop recommendations on best practices.

OUTREACH COMMITTEE

Current initiatives: 2016 saw the launch of the Staff Council Survey. This biennial survey tracks staff perceptions of ongoing concerns (such as salary and benefits issues) and helps reveal the current climate of staff opinions at the University. The majority of the Outreach Committee’s work during the 2015-2016 school year was dedicated to developing this survey and ensuring sufficient validity and reliability to receive the highest quality of usable data.

The 2016 version of the survey was released to 1,866 non-represented staff members across all units at the University and remained open for three weeks. 48% of eligible staff members completed the survey, a higher response rate than any previous iteration (7% increase over 2014). The data from the survey is currently being analyzed and will be used to develop Staff Council initiatives over the next two years.

Looking forward: The Outreach Committee’s next objective is to examine communication practices at the University of Vermont. We recognize that internal communication at UVM is consistently improving, but have heard a great deal of staff concern in FY16 that they are not receiving communications that are timely,
informative, or sufficiently detailed (and in some cases do not receive notifications at all). The Outreach Committee will offer recommendations to assist in the development of best practices that will provide the UVM community with information quickly, consistently, and transparently. In addition, the Outreach Committee is supportive of ongoing administrative efforts to improve internal and external University communications and will support these goals in whatever way it can.

COMPENSATION, BENEFITS AND BUDGET COMMITTEE (CBB)

Ongoing initiatives: The CBB Committee continues to work on building a collaborative relationship with University Administration and HRDMA, with the ultimate goal of Committee inclusion in discussions involving annual non-represented staff salary increases. CBB is committed to ensuring that decisions and communication made regarding salary increases are created via a strongly collaborative and transparent process between CBB and HRDMA. The Committee has identified lapses in communication and transparency around these issues throughout FY16. Again, this is a learning opportunity to improve collaborative processes, and we are committed to this improvement.

While the Committee did advocate for a “merit” portion to be awarded in addition to the annual salary increase, the end product that has been utilized in FY15 and FY16 does not match the Council’s original intent regarding merit. The Committee is currently working to clarify the Council’s original and current goals for merit raises in order to submit a recommendation to the Administration. While over 90% of University staff support merit raises (as per the 2016 Staff Council Survey), the newly released merit system has received an overwhelmingly negative response from staff. Understanding budget constraints, the Committee will continue to advocate for salary increases that are sufficient to counter the increases in health insurance rates and the ever-increasing utility and household costs.

Looking forward: The CBB Committee will continue to focus on identifying information and processes that are currently available and accessible with regard to Position Descriptions, Off-Cycle Increases, Pay Bands, and Professional Development, and will be providing recommendations for updates. A clearer understanding of the current systems is key to identifying and recommending improvements.

Salary Equity for all non-represented staff is a goal of this Committee. It is clear that the classification systems impact that equity, and that that there is a definite interconnectedness between Salary, Performance Evaluations, and Position Descriptions. Development of a strong Career Path program continues to be a major staff concern.

The Committee is also exploring: (1) Expanding the current job classifications to include tiered levels; (2) IBB and its impact with regard to salaries; (3) continual monitoring of recently launched Performance Evaluation Process in partnership with the PPD Committee; and (4) the need for an inclusive, transparent internal process when potential benefit changes are discussed (and how that information is communicated). CBB has also noted the need for an updated Staff Handbook (and we are pleased that HRDMA has acknowledged this as an item of future concern).
We are committed to working together with HRDMA and other campus partners, and we hope University administration will involve us in future discussions. As we continually receive and maintain data on staff opinions and feedback, the Committee – as well as the entire Council – can serve to anticipate staff concerns and, in turn, can help to achieve smoother roll-outs.

SOCIAL COMMITTEE

Recent initiatives: While the Social Committee had several notable successes in FY16, including the continuation of record high Holiday Bazaar attendance and revenue, the Committee also faced numerous challenges in FY16 as rising costs for transportation contracts forced the cancellation of a long-standing Social Committee tradition, the Casino Bus Trip. In addition, a warmer-than-normal winter meant that the sale of discounted ski vouchers was at an all-time low.

Looking forward: In response to the above challenges the Social Committee is working to identify new ways to engage the UVM community, taking advantage of local offerings around Chittenden County to create community-building events. In March, the Social Committee and the Staff Council Office jointly hosted the first annual Skate Night at the Gutterson rink, welcoming over 80 UVM community members and families. The Social Committee plans to strengthen and enrich its local partnerships and offerings over the upcoming year, including bringing back athletic ticket sales. In addition, the Committee has been successful in negotiating the conversion of unsold ski vouchers into water park tickets for the upcoming season, preventing a loss of Social Committee funds.

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our campus partners: In 2016, we are marking and recognizing Staff Council’s 45th anniversary. We are thankful to the hundreds of staff members who have served Staff Council in the past, as well as those current representatives who continue to represent and advocate for staff interests and concerns. Alongside our members we thank and recognize all University individuals and administrative offices who collaborate with us in our mission to create a better working life for staff. We could not be more grateful for everyone’s time, efforts, and commitment to University initiatives as we continually work towards fulfilling our goals and upholding Our Common Ground. In addition, we appreciate and thank each staff member who comes to us to bring forward feedback, compliments and concerns to assist the Council in its support role.

Staff Council transitions: FY16 saw the departure of long-time Staff Council Administrator Jeff Bukowski, who was responsible for growing and transforming the Council in innumerable ways over the preceding eight years. In December, we welcomed new Staff Council Administrator Meryl St. John and are excited by the new energy and enthusiasm she brings to the Council. FY17 will also see a new President and Vice President of Staff Council as President Renee Berteau and Vice President Johanna Brabham conclude their two years of service to the Council. The Council is grateful for their service and looks forward to new opportunities ahead.