

Communication, Efficiency, and Shared Governance at VSU

**Report Submitted by the
Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate**

March 6, 2015

Introduction

VSU can do little about such matters as budget cuts and rising health care costs. These are external factors we cannot control. However, we have the responsibility as an institution to minimize negative influences of external factors on internal matters. This is particularly true in the context of stagnating salaries, concerns about job security, lacking efficiency, and systemic problems with communication and leadership. We owe it to our students and ourselves to do a better job working as a team and with leaders who understand what is at stake. All of us are willing to go the extra mile if we feel appreciated and heard, and if we have a clear sense of where we are headed as an institution. It is time to provide a new vision for VSU and to instill a fresh sense of a team spirit that can lift us up during economically challenging times.

The following summary of experiences brings to light issues we cannot ignore. Some of them are small and easily fixed. Others are significant and demand a concerted effort. Please note that this summary is not based on hearsay or rumors and that each component presented has been verified. Because these are authentic experiences combined with a good amount of angst, every attempt was made to remove personal information and to simply extract the essence of an issue. Some observations are presented in a straightforward fashion so that there will be no misunderstanding of the urgency of our situation. When valuable members of the VSU family consider leaving because of avoidable conditions at their workplace, there is no time to waste.

In the last couple of weeks a number of important conversations have taken place at every level, but words alone will not be enough. All of us (faculty, students, staff, and administration) need to see tangible and measurable steps in the coming weeks and months to elevate VSU to a new level, and all of us need to step in to make this happen.

Let there be no doubt that some of the issues presented in this report are not only deeply felt by faculty but also by staff. Thus in order to turn the tide we need to commit to more transparency, so no one is left in the dark, while showing respect for the dignity of individual employees.

Academic (and Staff) Affairs

No other entity at VSU plays as important a role as the Provost's Office, particularly at a time of budget cuts, job insecurity, and a general anxiety about what the future holds. While the situation in which we find ourselves requires a good deal of tact and the ability to deftly handle all manner of delicate circumstances caused by budget cuts, the opposite often seems to be the case. Following are some examples of these conflicting situations that originate in the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

- when efficiency ought to be one of our prime directives, stalled operations, slowed-down approvals, and delayed sign-offs impact every aspect at VSU from reimbursements and transfer of funds to the approval of searches and study abroad programs and even such simple matters as blackout blinds for classrooms that need to be darkened for instruction;
- in meetings with the Provost, faculty and staff members too often have the sense that they are not heard and that their contributions are not valued;
- since the beginning of the school year, the general workload has increased as we are asked to provide years of data for not clearly articulated reasons. The additional workload negatively affects the time we have to do our regular work of preparing classes, assessing student work, service, and research;
- departments are told that average class sizes will determine how many instructors are needed without sufficient information on how such class sizes are calculated. What happens, for example, with lectures that have a lab component that might not be listed as such in BANNER? How are the special needs of departments considered which might require very different class sizes due to the nature of their respective fields? When will we get access to this model to evaluate its variables?

General Observations and Comments Regarding VSU

Although some of the issues we are dealing with at VSU may have predated the present senior leadership, they should have been addressed in the last few years:

- Lacking Vision for VSU: Whatever the “right size” may be for us, it seems that we lack a clear vision of what we need to do in the next five years or so to succeed as an institution in the context of enrollment challenges and fierce competition.
- Interim Positions: We have too many interim positions at VSU. Interims are less likely to make bold moves, thereby smothering innovation and the initiation of new directions. The number of years as an interim should be limited, and interim positions should be filled as soon as possible.
- Losing Critical Academic Teaching Mass / Survival Angst: Several departments at VSU have lost significant numbers of full-time faculty in the last couple of years and for a number of reasons (retirement, career move, etc.) but these positions remain unfilled. While budget cuts coupled with enrollment decline may explain the need to reduce an academic labor force, when the “loss of faculty has become an endemic problem” so that departments have to work “in an unending survival mode” and so that their programs and curricula cannot be sustained, the danger of a downward spiral becomes imminent.
(See Attachment A)
- Flat Library Budget: Odum Library cannot serve our students and faculty appropriately in the context of ongoing cuts to its budget. While the number of programs VSU is offering is increasing, the library is asked to trim even further than it already has, thereby undermining the quality of academic resources available to everyone.
- Chain-of-Command: Strict communication along a narrow and hierarchical chain of command can be inefficient and very slow, constraining communication, smothering creative energies, and discouraging feedback. Allow for a more direct communication of complaints as well as creative ideas to key-players at VSU via electronic “drop-boxes”.
- General Communication: Too often VSU faculty and staff do not seem to be informed about what is going on at our institution and even in regard to such overarching matters as a Master Plan or a marketing campaign. While likely much of the information is available to those who seek it, we need to adopt a more proactive approach. This may involve sharing of information by elected officers, senators, etc. with their respective constituencies, but we also have to explore other and perhaps more efficient ways to communicate.
- Ombudsman: No working environment will ever be perfect. Employees at VSU would benefit even from a part-time ombudsman position to help with aspects of mediation and communication and to ensure their rights.

- Transparency: Make transparency a priority across all branches of shared governance. Without information rumors replace facts. While the newly installed rumor mill is a good idea, it is better yet to avoid rumors in the first place.
- Organizational Structure: It has become clear that we need to analyze and improve our formal organizational structure at VSU to address existing weaknesses. Thus, an ad hoc committee is currently under consideration (to be chaired by Ed Walker). This committee might also analyze the vertical organization at VSU. Innovative organizations typically do not increase their vertical components, but tend to flatten. How many administrative positions have been created at VSU in the last couple of years (with high salaries during times of budget cuts) and how do we compare to other USG institutions?
- Ads for Faculty Positions: Allow departments to write their own ads and use them. Repeatedly ads have been changed without the knowledge of department heads. Reevaluate the usefulness of a centralized and standardized process that potentially undermines effective searches.
- Reaching out to Regional High School Students: When enrollment figures are down we can ill afford to ignore potential students from our own region. While VSU is making great strides to cast a wider net by including counties and community colleges in northern Florida and by investing in a marketing campaign in northern Georgia, we must not overlook qualified, local prospective students. (See related document from the GA DOE: <http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/CTAE/Documents/FY15-Dual-Enrollment-FAQ.pdf>)
- Becoming More Adult Learner Focused: While general enrollment figures are declining, adult student enrollment has actually increased over the past couple of years. How can VSU best meet the needs of the growing adult student population? (See Attachment B)
- Administrative Annual Evaluations: The evaluations of administrators need to be as formalized as evaluations of faculty. At this point the yearly evaluations of administrators are viewed as a meaningless exercise, wasting both time and paper, while faculty evaluations play a significant role in the process of tenure and promotion.
- Department Heads versus Department Chairs? Most of us are fortunate to work in departments with cherished colleagues and department heads, but there are exceptions to this rule, creating an academic working environment that is less conducive to successful teaching and research. Adopting a “department chair model” might be one way to improve quality and flexibility in our programs as chairs could be elected for three years. They could be re-elected for consecutive terms if successful; they would be accountable to their deans and their faculty; and they would eventually become colleagues again. This model is used at institutions like UGA and includes positions of associate department chairs (for one course release).

- Non-Responsiveness, Lack of Cooperative Spirit, and Inefficiency:
 - Lighting issues in a Nevins Hall class room could easily be addressed by installing a dimmer switch. The estimated cost for this dimmer switch was first more than \$1,000 but was eventually downgraded to \$127. More than two months later the department is still waiting for the installation of the dimmer switch.
 - A variety of programs at VSU offer important field experiences requiring the transport of a larger number of students. While professors are often able to transport students to these events with the help of minivans, some may not be qualified or comfortable enough to do so. Why can departments/programs not have access to VSU sponsored transportation for significant events when faculty cannot play the role of a chauffeur?
 - Over the years, when a number of renovation projects were planned at VSU, the input of faculty and their departments was sought in regard to specific classroom or office space needs. Yet when the time came to translate these requests into fully functioning classrooms as well as appropriate office spaces (within budgetary limits) the overall impressions were that our input was ignored, leading to frustration and further “renovations” down the road.
 - Do maintenance contracts or service agreements truly go against BOR and state policy? Service contracts result in quick repair of pieces of equipment and are much cheaper than paying a technician hourly rates to fix equipment. A lack of maintenance and service agreements has the potential of affecting many pieces of equipment that are used by units across campus in nursing, biology, chemistry, etc. For example, VSU does not pay for a service contract on a Scanning Electron Microscope (a >\$200,000 piece of equipment used for teaching and research). Failure to have service contracts will result in higher fees for service, which is not only inefficient, but non-productive.

Attachment B

Suggestions for Becoming More Adult Learner Focused

Over the past decade, adult student enrollment increased 43 percent, with another 23 percent increase expected by 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, few institutions that offer on-campus or blended instruction provide the unique services and programs adult students need to successfully complete their degrees. Institutions must adjust their operational services, academic support services, and academic programs and policies to best meet the distinctive needs of the growing adult student population.

What can we do to compete and meet the needs of adult learners?

1. **Get a sense of what an adult who is interested in returning to VSU might experience.** Call the main telephone number and tell them that you have a significant number of college credits and would like to explore your options for coming back to school. See where you are directed and how these calls are handled. Were you directed to individual departments, admissions, the registrar's office? Can the person who answered the phone address common questions that a ready adult might have?

2. **Review the potential for reallocating existing resources in order to better serve adult learners.** By combining resources from our Off Campus Programs, Adult and Military Programs, Admissions, and Adult and Career Education degree programs, a *Center for Adult Learner Services* could be created. This Center would bring together a wide range of services for adult students. It would serve as the primary resource and contact for students thus reducing the number of entities with which students may have to interact. Students would be able to obtain service for registration, admission and advising, tutoring, faculty advising, program information, and transcripts. Orientation and transitional programs that would help students overcome fears they may have about returning to campus would be provided. The *Center for Adult Learner Services* would provide a single point of contact with which returning adults can work as they go through the process of re-enrolling in college.

Working one-on-one with returning adult students is a time-intensive process and would require funding for staff positions dedicated to this role. Advising adult students is much more involved than a 30-minute advising appointment each semester. Faculty advisors in ACED are advising up to 50 adult students each, most of it done at a distance, which encroaches on time that should be spent on teaching, service, and scholarly activity.

Having trained personnel in admissions who can discuss academic and career backgrounds and how they fit with program offerings offered to adult learners would be required to help guide these students through the admissions process.

Our adult students need a simpler enrollment process and more flexible ways to transfer earned college credits.

3. We need a systemic approach that focuses on the adult learner experience with VSU from initial contact to degree completion.

- a. Extend hours for student service offices. Adults are generally working full time, making visits to campus during normal business hours is a barrier to them.
- b. Expand online options and other flexible programs and services. Take the operation of the admissions office, bookstore, financial aid, etc. to the places adults live and work rather than waiting from them to come to campus.

4. Do existing policies and procedures hinder adult learners' efforts to enroll in college and complete a credential?

- a. Conduct an audit to assess the impact of policies and procedures on adult learners.
- b. Establish adult-friendly campus policies and practices
- c. Review transfer policies: Students are unable to get an assessment of whether and how their credits will transfer until after they have enrolled at VSU, rather than being able to compare different institutions based on how the credits would be applied to a degree program. How can we be more flexible and more transparent in our transfer policies?
- d. Streamline practices for offering credit for prior learning and experiential credit. Build a matrix that shows all ways students can earn credit for specific courses (and provide for keeping it updated continuously).
- e. Review fees charged to adult students who do not participate in activities or need health services.

5. Remove bureaucratic barriers that can impede adult learners from enrolling

- a. Difficulties locating transcripts and having them analyzed for transfer credit
- b. Receiving conflicting information from different offices on campus
- c. Our adult students need a simpler enrollment process and more flexible ways to transfer earned college credits.
- d. Students must deal with numerous entities: eCore, eMajor, eLearning, VSU, Face-to-Face, VSU Off-Campus, Military bases.
- e. Eliminate all forms that require that a paper copy or signature is necessary. Most adult learners work all day and live far from campus. Make all forms electronic.
- f. Review scholarship guidelines. Most are inherently biased toward traditional students.

6. **How can we get our adult learner programs included in the “Go Back. Move Ahead” initiative?**

“In order for Georgia to remain economically competitive, we must have an educated work force, and focusing on college completion is one way we intend to do that,” said Gov. Deal. “‘Go Back. Move Ahead.’ provides resources for prospective students and makes it easy for any Georgian who has started college to go back to school and earn a degree or certificate.”

The initiative will offer Georgians a simpler enrollment process, more flexible ways to transfer earned college credits, additional course schedule options and a personal academic advisor. Options for returning to college in Georgia include enrolling on campus, taking classes at a satellite location or using the online options available at many of Georgia’s public institutions.

The USG and TCSG are collaborating on the effort, which will include unprecedented public outreach to every part of Georgia. A significant media buy will purchase billboards, radio, video, print, and online digital media. There will also be grassroots community outreach and operational improvements at **key campuses** to make it easier for Georgia adults to return to college and earn their degrees. Interested students can be connected to a college representative online at www.gobackmoveahead.org or by calling 1-844-GOBACKNOW.

Source: http://www.usg.edu/news/release/governor_nathan_deal_announces_go_back_move_ahead_campaign

Source: Department of Adult and Career Education