



NEWS: LIVE members interrupt Board of Trustees committee meeting

Submitted by [Allison Malone](#) on 11-16-06, 9:29 pm | Updated on 11-17-06, 11:20 am

Students show up at morning meeting unannounced, demand support for [living wage](#)

Bearing pictures of Vanderbilt employees, 25 students marched silently into a Board of Trustees student life committee meeting Thursday morning.

After contacting the administration and receiving no response, members of the student group Living Income for Vanderbilt Employees decided to barge into the meeting unannounced to make their voices heard.

In a single-file line they positioned themselves in the front of the room, behind the forum speakers that continued to present. At 11:45 a.m., senior Diane Faires interjected.

"Sorry to interrupt, but we have an urgent vision for Vanderbilt that we would like to present to you at this time," she said.

"We are students of Vanderbilt University and members of [Living Income for Vanderbilt Employees](#). We come to you today to propose that Vanderbilt University implement a living wage for all of its employees."

While the administration acknowledged their concerns although they were not on the agenda, Chancellor Gordon Gee refused to sign the petition, but said he would discuss their requests in a private meeting Friday.

The play-by-play

Faires said LIVE had addressed the administration and Young Alumni Trustee forums "countless times" to respond to their concerns, but had only received "vague talking points" in return.

"After four years of asking politely for true dialogue and access to information, we are here today to demand it," she said.

She called for the board and administration to review their proposal, which outlines their calculation of a living wage, as well as to present a fully transparent cost analysis, estimating the cost for the university to implement a living wage, by Dec. 7.

The students concluded their speech by demanding [Chancellor Gordon Gee](#), Chairwoman Martha Ingram and an additional board representative sign a statement of commitment at that moment saying that they would address their concerns.

They paused and waited for Gee to respond.

"Thank you for coming," Gee said. "The notion of us not having a constructive dialogue is a misrepresentation, but I will accept your concerns. The notion of coming in and making a presentation is very helpful, but coming in and making a presentation threateningly is not constructive."

Gee said that with employee contracts negotiations between the Vanderbilt employee union and the university currently underway, it would not be "in the spirit of negotiations" to discuss the issue in that sort of format.

"I, for one, will not sign anything with this kind of environment," Gee said.

In response, LIVE member Tim Bowles, a senior, said the format of discussion was "forced upon us."

"We have attended four consecutive Young Alumni Trustee forums, but no progress has been made," Bowles said.

"We want numbers and we want that in the form of a cost analysis," Bowles said. "We're not asking for the implementation of a living wage, we are asking to take a step in that direction. What we are asking for is not out of balance. Coming in here and interrupting this meeting is unfortunate, but it has been forced upon us."

Bowles mentioned a personal meeting he had with Gee but he said the meetings were not productive because of the "same vague rhetoric."

After speaking briefly with [Vice Chancellor David Williams](#), Gee told the students he would arrange to meet with them along with two other board members the following afternoon to discuss their petition.

In response, Bowles said "any answer other than yes will be interpreted as no." He said LIVE intended to use one of two press releases: the first stating the administration agreed to cost analysis and is in support of the idea of living wage, or the second stating that the administration refused to do a cost analysis or support the idea of living wage.

The chancellor said he did not want to continue discussion with "a gun to our head," but said he wanted to have an open dialogue in a private meeting with LIVE members.

He said a meeting will allow him to also "make the points I want to make."

"If you say what I have said is vague, I think it's been very clear," Gee said. "So I want to be heard also."

Bowles reiterated that he would release the second press release stating that the administration is not interested in discussing fair wages for Vanderbilt employees.

Gee, banging his hands on the table, encouraged the students to release the statement. He said, "Please do. First of all, that is not the way you deal with an institution. That is not addressing the issue. So if you are going to do that, then please do it, and you have our blessing in doing that and we will still meet tomorrow."

The meeting ended with Board of Trust member Darryl Berger telling the students that they had been heard, and now it was time to from the student groups who were on the meeting agenda, because if they kept talking it would be unfair to other students.

After the Meeting

After the living wage students filed out of the Board Trustees room, there was not further discussion of the living wage issue, and the forum continued as planned.

LIVE members congregated in the Studio Arts Building and discussed their next move.

"I am really pleased our voices were heard in the meeting and appreciate the fact that the board listened to what we had to say," senior Ellen McSweeney said. "But I think it's really disappointing that the university can't even commit publicly to a cost analysis."

McSweeney said that the cost analysis is the first step towards living wage discussions. She said that if Gee does not sign a commitment to a cost analysis, she does not see how the private meeting will be productive.

"Our goal is to express to the public just how unwilling the administration is to publicly address these issues," she said. "They want to have a private meeting with us, but we want to tell the entire Vanderbilt community."

LIVE contacted Vice Chancellor Williams last Friday to set up a time to present their proposal to the Board of Trustees.

Williams responded to their e-mail the next day saying he would contact the executive committee.

"You can understand that the agenda for the Board meeting is pretty full however I will ask the Board if they can grant your request," Williams said in an e-mail to senior Stacy Tolos. "I need to inform you that there are not any student organizations that are presenting to the Board during this meeting; however, some might be involved in committee activities."

In the e-mail, Williams said he would respond by Tuesday or Wednesday. However, after LIVE members did not receive a response, they made the discussion to attend the meeting unannounced.

Williams confirmed this e-mail correspondence and said he had planned to schedule a meeting with LIVE and trustees, but had not contacted them.

Meeting attendees respond

After the committee adjourned, meeting attendees discussed among themselves the LIVE surprise presentation. Berger said he thinks the issue of fair wages is very important.

"I have been to many student forums so I've heard a great deal about it," Berger said. "It is clearly a very important and critical topic, and I'm glad that students have the intellectual, social energy to engage in moving this topic forward."

President of SGA Boone Lancaster said he understands the frustrations of LIVE, however, he said that interrupting the meeting was not the best way to get their voices heard.

"I understand they have had frustrations with the issue, but I'm not sure if this carried a lot of favor with the board members while interrupting the on-going meeting," he said "I also felt for the students we had presenting on Vanderbilt Visions, because it limited the discussions on another important aspect going on at Vanderbilt."

Background

Before interrupting the Board of Trust committee meeting, members of LIVE assembled in the Studio Arts Building and rehearsed their presentation.

LIVE had been preparing to address the Board of Trustees for two weeks with workshops for members educating them on non-violent resistance.

"We are trying to go about this in a professional way, but still in a way that dramatizes the gravity of this issue, of the crisis we have with the low wages of Vanderbilt employees," Bowles said.

"This is the first step in a series of last resorts," Bowles said. "We will fit this into our strategy based on their reaction."

Allison Malone and Ally Smith co-authored this story.