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Gee is paid a lot while many at VU aren't paid enough

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Guest Commentary

Reading the recent articles in The Wall Street Journal and The Tennessean regarding Vanderbilt University Chancellor Gordon Gee, it is clear that he is very good at his job. When questioned about his generous spending habits, Gee points to the rising quality of education at Vanderbilt, his success at raising funds for the school, and his vast experience as the head of a university. Perhaps his salary, one of the highest in the nation for his position, is a good value for Vanderbilt.

But there are other employees of Vanderbilt — many of whom are also very good at their jobs and have more seniority on campus than the chancellor — whose work deserves to be valued, too.

More than 300 housekeepers, groundskeepers and food service staff at the university don't make enough to meet the basic needs of their families, while Chancellor Gee spends \$700,000 per year on parties and a private chef, not to mention the \$6 million dollar renovation to his residence. These low-paid employees must work second or even third jobs just to cover food, health care and rent on a modest home. Some make less than \$7.40 per hour, yet they are expected to pay \$200 per year to park at their place of employment.

These are not just entry-level workers. Even many staff who have worked on campus for 10 or 20 years make less than the \$10.18/hour calculated as a conservative living wage (a living wage is defined as the minimum income needed for a family of four with two wage-earners to survive without government assistance).

In addition, these hard-working employees labor under policies that infringe on their dignity and basic fair labor practices. The union that represents Vanderbilt's lowest-paid workers can't come on campus to check in with union members.

I spoke with one warm, friendly longtime housekeeper who told me that custodial staff has been ordered not to speak with the students who live in the dorms they clean. This grandmotherly woman expressed her sadness that she can't offer comforting words to homesick students she encounters.

Vanderbilt is currently renegotiating the contract of its lowest-paid employees. The union that represents them is asking for modest wage increases, such as a 30-cent raise in the hourly base pay. This still will not raise the base pay for entry-level workers to a living wage, but it would enable all employees who remain at the university for more than three years to work their way up to a living wage. The union also is pushing for policies that would create more just working conditions.

As a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, questions of justice and how we live out our values and faith are part of my daily coursework. When people look at the practices of any organization, its values and commitments are clear. I certainly hope that when people look at my university, grand mansions and lavish parties are not the first things that spring to mind. Successful fundraising may be a priority, but only if it is a means of realizing the higher ideals to which the university aspires.

Surely a chancellor who is so good at raising funds can find the money to offer all employees a wage that not only values their hard work but values them as human beings who should be able to support their families in exchange for the long hours of service that keep the campus so beautiful. Surely a chancellor who is among the highest paid university leaders in the country can ensure that all of his staff members get a decent salary that allows them to meet their family's basic needs. Surely a chancellor who has raised the standards of the university can raise the standard of treatment of all members of the Vanderbilt community to the level of human dignity they deserve. Such an achievement would be a real reason to party. •

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