



Username: *

Password: *

[Register](#) | [Fo](#)[news](#)[sports](#)[life](#)[opinion](#)[blogs](#)[photos](#)[multimedia](#)[podcasts](#)[calendar](#)[adve](#)

full story

COLUMN: University leaders are presented with opportunity

comments

» [login](#) or [regis](#)

Submitted by [Tim Bowles](#) on 10-01-06, 8:09 pm | Updated on 10-02-06, 1:13 pm

To the probable chagrin of our administration, the recent Wall Street Journal article about Chancellor Gee and the lack of board oversight has revealed both some sensationalist and significant news about the workings of Vanderbilt at the highest level.

While the allegations of Constance Gee's marijuana use at Braeburn reek of gratuitous personal attack, the information provided about Gee's salary and lifestyle and the renovations at Braeburn reveal in stark terms the great divide that exists at Vanderbilt. The article also exposed hypocrisy that Gee and the Board of Trustees should be ashamed of – hypocrisy for which we should demand remedy.

The millions spent on Braeburn and Gee's parties are not inherently unethical or necessarily unfair. They could be construed as excessive, but there is likely validity in Gee's assertion that such entertaining space is a vital part of fundraising for the university. However, Gee's assertions are not quantifiable or falsifiable. We will never know what portion of the multi-billion dollar endowment Gee raised as a result of the \$6 million expenditures to renovate Braeburn, nor how much a \$50,000-per-year personal chef is really necessary.

Likewise, it would be impossible to verify how many of Vanderbilt's advances over the past years can be attributable directly to Gee. The ascent of Vanderbilt is a result of the contributions of faculty members, students, staff and administrators alike, so whether Gee deserves his enormous compensation package is another question

without a clear answer.

But there is one assertion that can be made from the Wall Street Journal article and the barrage of public relations efforts that followed: Vanderbilt has a lot of money.

And that is the essence of our administration's naked hypocrisy.

Repeatedly, Gee and the administration claim a lack of money as an excuse for not implementing practices that would make this university a just and downright good place all-around. Vanderbilt has refused to make recycling bins as available as trash cans because administrators say the cost is too great. Worse, Vanderbilt has repeatedly refused and actively resisted paying sufficient wages that would enable all its employees to feed, to clothe, to educate, to care for and to raise their families adequately. Both in public and in personal conversation, Gee and Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs Michael Schoenfeld have cited budget limitations again and again as their primary objections to expanded recycling and decent wages. Yet, it is clear that our budget is neither cash-strapped nor closely monitored.

The Board's investment in Gee and Braeburn is thus made unethical and immoral because they have used the return on that investment partly to lavish further benefits on its wealthiest administrators instead of lifting up the whole Vanderbilt community.

Rather, it has perpetuated a system where 300 Vanderbilt employees must work two and three jobs to pay bills while sacrificing time with their children, where 300 Vanderbilt employees must make choices among necessities of food, childcare, healthcare, housing and transportation, where 300 Vanderbilt employees have little hope of ever making more than \$10 per hour – even if they work here for 13 years.

It is estimated that \$2 million annually would provide all Vanderbilt employees with an hourly rate that would allow them to make ends meet without extra jobs or government assistance. That amount of money is less than 0.05 percent of Vanderbilt's annual budget and less than 0.08 percent of the money raised on Gee's watch.

Gee and his administration fight tooth and nail over every penny and pittance allotted to Vanderbilt workers and even demand from them fees to park (in spaces owned by a Board of Trust member), but then brag about the billions they have raised. These billions have done a tremendous amount of good for our university, but they remain tainted by the gross divide between the lowest- and highest-paid employees of this university – a divide that is so large because this administration’s priorities do not lie with the livelihood of all Vanderbilt workers.

Gee wrote to us “the Journal’s report on this important issue presented an incomplete portrait of Vanderbilt.” It was indeed incomplete. It failed to mention the hypocrisy that is a greater issue than board oversight, marijuana use or lavish spending.

It is essential that Gee, the administration and the Board of Trustees treat this as an opportunity to make this the best university it can be, not as an inconvenience to be contained through public relations jargon.

A lack of money is no longer a legitimate justification for the status quo.

The leaders of our university have an opportunity and the resources to make a significant, positive impact on 300 employees and the Nashville community. Dropping their excuses and fixing the employment inequities would be the best public relations strategy the university could adopt.

Tim Bowles is a senior in the College of Arts and Science

[Back to Top](#)