PRESIDENT’S COLUMN

Tisa Mason, Ed.D.

Most people will agree that when it comes to an Oreo, the middle filling is what makes the cookie special. When it comes to college, however, the two ends of the experience—our rituals of welcome and the year-end celebrations—are the best part for me. I find them delectable!

This past week we held one of the year-end celebrations at VCSU, the Student Opportunities for Academic Research (SOAR) Celebration Banquet. SOAR is a research program designed to encourage faculty-mentored research, artistry, and creativity projects for undergraduates. The accomplishments of our student-faculty teams through this program are strong evidence of the way we live out our mission—preparing students “to succeed as educators, leaders, and engaged citizens in an increasingly complex and diverse society.”

SOAR is clearly an excellent example of what the Association of American Colleges and Universities refers to as high-impact educational experiences. Identified in the work of student-engagement scholar George Kuh, high-impact educational practices are simply well-documented college experiences which facilitate student success. From research we know that the two most powerful influences on college student success are students’ relationships with their faculty and with their peers. SOAR maximizes this variable in significant ways.

VCSU SOAR Projects

- Tarah Cleveland (Razib Iqbal, Ph.D.), “Investigating a New Approach to Web Visitor Engagement Measurement”
- Niklas Ernst (Luis da Vinha, Ph.D.), “The Unfinished Presidencies: Why Incumbent Presidents Lose Their Reelection Campaigns”
- Cassy Gilbertson and Kaylee Johnson (Karri Dieken, M.F.A.), “3D Printing K-12 Project Curriculum”
- Maxwell Kollar (Hilde van Gjissel, Ph.D.), “Creating a Bacterial Mercury Sensor Using Synthetic Biology”
- Logen Olesen (Susan Kilgore, Ph.D.), “The Use of Sand Fraction Lithology Analysis to Differentiate Sediment Layers at an Archaeological Site in Grand Portage, Minnesota”
- Eric Schauer (Gary Ketterling, Ph.D.), “Engineering an Autonomous Ecosystem for Use in Science Classrooms”
- Justin Tangen (Andre DeLorme, Ph.D.), “Using Side-Scanning Sonar to Detect Mussel Beds in North Dakota Rivers”

Examples of how faculty members impact student learning through SOAR include the following:

- From their time with faculty mentors, student mentees come to understand on a very personal
level that they matter to someone important, someone who believes in their ability to engage in significant work. This will not only keep them in college, it may inspire them to reach even further to pursue a terminal degree. Research also indicates that faculty investment in them may persuade these students to pursue research-related careers.

- A student mentee spends a fair amount of time with their professor and as a result is able to observe firsthand how that person thinks and how he/she deals with the inevitable challenges that crop up in the course of exploration. This sense of adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving facilitates students’ personal growth and competence as they thrive in college and beyond.

- Student mentees receive more immediate and frequent feedback than their peers. Faculty mentors have helped them to better understand themselves in relation to others and the world, as well as to acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition.

VCSU students have many choices and opportunities. Deciding to participate in the competitive SOAR program will produce payoffs the students cannot yet imagine. From the student vantage point, there are several examples of how the SOAR program has influenced them:

- Student participation in SOAR has demonstrated that each student scholar has devoted considerable time and effort to a very purposeful task. It has required daily decisions that have deepened their investment in the research and/or creative process and strengthened their connection to their faculty mentor, as well as their commitment to their academic program.

- Participating in SOAR has placed these students in the company of faculty mentors and peers who share intellectual interests and who are committed to ensuring their personal and professional growth and success. Although many benefits can be reaped from other student activities, the one distinguishing aspect of the SOAR program is that it’s a fast-paced accelerator to success.

- Students who competed for a place in the SOAR program have been provided with an opportunity to connect learning to the world beyond campus. In the future, many of them may look back and see growth in their self-confidence, self-direction, and self-knowledge, and recognize the program’s contributions to their effective interaction with supervisors, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, problem-solving, and ethical judgment.

- This one decision—and the work that went with it—that these VCSU students made will be a distinguishing feature of their student experience and provide them with substantial benefits (economic, civic, and personal) in their future. I suspect several of them may even look back and call this one decision life-changing.

Special thanks to Margaret Dahlberg, Ph.D, vice president for academic affairs; David DeMuth, Ph.D., director of undergraduate research and artistry; Steven King, D.A., dean of curriculum and assessment; the SOAR advisory board; and especially to the faculty and student research teams for making this program a successful aspect of the VCSU experience. This program is yet another example of why it is a great day to be a Viking!

**FACULTY SENATE REPORT**

*K. Peder Gjovik*

*Workforce Training—Preparing the Teachers*

In the wake of the completion of the 2015 legislative session, I recently watched an interview with two representatives of the business sector regarding their opinions on the just-completed session. Both indicated concern over perceived shortfalls in financial support of technical training programs and workforce development in two-year colleges in North Dakota.

Although currently teaching at VCSU, I have 30 years combined experience as a community college trade instructor and a commercial printing and design business owner. I was heartened by the call of these business representatives for expansion of programs to provide technical specialty training.

The timing of the recently approved Don Mugan Career and Technical Education Leadership Center at VCSU positions us well to help in vetting qualified teachers, not only in K-12 schools, but for our partners at two-year colleges around the state. We trust the Mugan Center will eventually become a hub of solutions to the state, region, and nation, through online delivery of content and pedagogy for teachers.
The proposed Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) currently under consideration will be critical for our program’s ability to provide sound pedagogical skills for technical specialty instructors at two-year colleges. While there has been some discussion of “mission creep,” this degree would simply provide another option in our existing master’s offerings to assist in providing solutions to meet the needs of future technical instructors at state schools and colleges.

Final Ruminations
As I pen this missive, I am nearing the end of a two-year term as president of the VCSU Faculty Association. I am also completing my fourth semester as department chair of the Technology and Engineering Education and Career andTechnical Education programs.

This spring has been troubling as we have experienced several failed searches across the campus, and salary is at the core of these failed searches. Although my program was approved for a new position for next fall, the position remains unfilled as we made offers that were turned down. It appears we will need to hire adjuncts to get through the next academic year with on-campus faculty carrying a heavier load of campus-based requirements such as committee work and advising.

It is troubling to me because I experienced a similar situation while at a two-year college in Wyoming. At the time we were experiencing issues with hiring qualified faculty. Teachers with bachelor’s degrees in K–12 schools were earning more considerably more annually than instructors and professors with master’s degrees at the local two-year college. The situation mushroomed until our funding authority finally had to initiate an across-the-board 19.2 percent raise to faculty. I am concerned that we are headed down a similar path.

If we are to hire qualified professors as replacements or for new/expanding programs, or to employ necessary staff to support this university, we will need to find ways to offer more competitive salary packages. That being said, the benefit package I receive is the best of my career and certainly a solid recruiting tool.

Therein lies the rub—benefit packages don’t put food on the table or make home and car payments. Retirement plans are also stressed, as low salaries don’t compound as well and lead to financial issues during retirement—thus forcing some to remain employed past typical retirement age.

Every day I see incredibly talented and dedicated faculty and staff doing great things while putting the needs of our students first—all at a substantially lower salary than should be acceptable. I recently served on a subcommittee to evaluate employee satisfaction, and in my view, early indications are troubling. We still need further and deeper analysis, but it appears salary may be at the core of a number of perplexing issues.

I call for stakeholders in North Dakota higher education to search for solutions to the salary conundrum. If we are to continue to grow and expand our offerings, finding qualified personnel will be critical—competitive salaries lie at the core.

**STAFF SENATE REPORT**

*Kaleen Peterson*

The 2014-2015 academic year for VCSU’s Staff Senate was full of new and exciting things:

- We had another successful staff appreciation event, and we have ideas for more in terms of staff fellowship.
- We rolled out a satisfaction survey which was well-received and brought out some great improvement potential for the environment of our campus.
- We oversaw a subcommittee to add pieces to the onboarding process for new employees that will hopefully help them feel more informed and welcomed, in addition to instilling that Viking Pride from the beginning of their time here.
- We pulled together another subcommittee to review and edit our bylaws and constitution so that policy will align with practice and vice versa.
- We contributed time to discussing and supporting the Program Optimization Process (POP).
- Very exciting this year was finding a place on the Executive Team, which not only gives staff a voice at the table, but also allows another avenue of information gathering and sharing.

Our aspirations for the coming year largely stem from the Employee Satisfaction Survey results that we gathered this past spring. We have learned from this experience that Cabinet is open to listening to our ideas and that campus staff members participate in calls for comments and change.

We plan to put more surveys out to check the pulse of the campus climate and keep moving improvement
plans forward. One of these ideas is to run a monthly informative session with a standing agenda and a report-out feel. Staff Senate would oversee what began years ago as a committee meeting, grew to include more departments, and now is valued by many for information sharing on campus.

We will also possibly receive training on open meetings from State Staff Senate. And we need to prioritize a discussion about making a strong impact on campus but not overcommitting Staff Senate to too many tasks at one time. Figuring out how to make the best use of our limited resources as a senate ties in as well.

Overall, we aim to foster greater collaboration and unity between faculty, staff, students, and other campus stakeholders, and continue to work to raise that morale and make Valley City State University a great place to work, live, and play!

STUDENT SENATE REPORT
Michaela Halvorson

My favorite saying in college was a classic from Ben Franklin: “If you want something done, give it to a busy person.” Being involved in student government took up a lot of time—with several meetings a week, assigned to-dos, emailing, more emailing, and constant preparation for the next meeting. But I have never been more efficient in my life as I was balancing these activities with school. This is an experience that everyone on senate this year has shared and grown from.

Students are our priority. In the past year, we’ve done great work to advocate for students’ best interests. We worked hard to move our Health and Wellness Center forward and succeeded. Senators made our first resolution toward Measure 3 and successfully educated our students about all the measures and how to vote. We continued to support student activities on campus like Earth Week, Spring Blast, and Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service.

Being in a leadership position in student government was an amazing way to learn management skills without even realizing it. I learned how to run meetings efficiently (so we could all make it back in time to watch “The Bachelor”), how to give tough feedback when someone was slacking, and how to motivate a team (hint: cookies and cakes were often involved).

As a senate we grew as people. We learned to rely on each other. Believe it or not doing things on our own isn’t always the best option. Henry Ford said it best: “Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress and working together is success.” With this in mind our campus looks forward to the new leadership next year and making VCSU an even better place.

STUDENT SCHOLAR SYMPOSIUM

More than 50 Valley City State University students presented research papers, projects and posters at the Student Scholar Symposium held Tuesday, May 5, in the Student Center Skoal Room on the VCSU campus. The symposium entrants were judged by a group of VCSU faculty and staff members; awards were given as follows:

2015 VCSU Student Scholar Symposium Awards

Best in Show
Tarah Cleveland, “Web Visitor Engagement: Where We Are Today”

Runner Up
Logan Olesen, “Sand Fraction Lithology Methods to Analyze Archaeological Sediments in Grand Portage, Minnesota”

Third Place
Kaylee Johnson and Cassy Gilbertson, “3D Printing K-12 Project Curriculum”

Tarah Cleveland won Best of Show and Viewer’s Choice Award at the 2015 VCSU Student Scholar Symposium for her research poster on web visitor engagement.