COMMENCEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES  
Tuesday, September 10, 2002  
12:15 p.m.  
President's Boardroom, 210 Burruss Hall

PRESENT: Ed Henneke, Reba Crawford, John Beach for Bill Elvey, Pat Goodrich, Larry Hincker, Brad Klein, Kim O'Rourke, Dixie Reaves, Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, Dan Taylor

GUESTS: Susan Angle, Dave McKee, Allan Miller, Margie Murray, Lyndell Price, Jennie Reilly, Jack Riding

ABSENT: Jerry Allen, Randy Billingsley, Bud Brown, Leon Geyer, Bill Green, Grant Hill, Vinod Lohani, Dean Stauffer, CUS&P Representative, GSA Representative, CALS Representative

(Note: E-mail notes were sent to SGA and GSA encouraging them to have a representative attend.)

Chairman Ed Henneke called the meeting to order at 12:16 p.m. He first welcomed everyone and asked that self-introductions be made for the benefit of new members.

Approval of Minutes from the May 1, 2002 Meeting
The first order of business was to call for a vote on the approval of the minutes from the last meeting. With no discussion, the minutes were approved unanimously as written.

Recap of Spring Commencement Activities
The members of the committee were asked to share observations about the operation of the spring ceremony.

1. Taylor indicated that access to the east stands for the general public was a problem. A woman fell, and based on her location and the crowd, it was difficult to get emergency services to her in a timely manner. Pedestrians were not given the option of traveling under the north end zone bleachers, but were asked to walk on the access road. Taylor suggested that there be at least one rescue squad individual stationed in the general area of the east stands with an emergency pack for such instances.

In response, Beach said there would have been better access to the east stands if the south end zone had been accessible, and if the normal processional activities were in place. In the future, the east stands will still be an issue, and signs should be posted to indicate access routes.

2. Reilly noted that she had heard many positive comments about the use of the Jumbotron for the Virginia Tech informational videos, and asked if they could possibly be captioned for the hearing impaired.

Hincker indicated that the purpose of the videos for spring commencement was to occupy the guests since there would be no processional. Also, there were concerns, discussed by the committee, about keeping the crowd—particularly students, from becoming unruly. McKee acknowledged the Jumbotron's effectiveness in controlling the crowd during the ceremony itself, but noted that the videos played before the ceremony interfered with the band. Hincker indicated this could still be done, but would add to commencement costs for each ceremony.
Along the same line, Beach reminded everyone that in prior meetings, the committee discussed moving the stage setup to the south end zone now that it is complete. The main reason for this move is the necessity to keep a minimum amount of heavy traffic on the new field. A major disadvantage of this move would be we would no longer have the Jumbotron visual display of the commencement speakers appearing directly above the stage. John Beach said he thought that physical plant could continue to set the stage in the north end with use of appropriate wide tires on vehicles, but this would be more difficult in cases where inclement weather in days prior to the ceremony would cause additional problems. Reilly did mention that having the stage in front of the Jumbotron helped with accessibility needs.

Based on the ongoing discussion, Henneke mentioned that this could be discussed in later meetings, and that the committee could wait until the last week before the ceremony to decide the advantages or disadvantages to having the stage moved, depending upon the weather. It was noted that the additional option of having access to the new club seats and concession area in the south end zone would be a plus for the stage party.

Future Meeting Dates
The issue of the upcoming meetings dates was discussed prior to the budget discussion with the following results. The future meeting dates by agreement of the committee will be:

- Wednesday, October 2, 2002
- Wednesday, November 6, 2002
- Wednesday, December 4, 2002
- Wednesday, February 5, 2003
- Wednesday, March 12, 2003
- Wednesday, April 2, 2003
- Wednesday, April 30, 2003

All meetings will be held in the President's Boardroom, 210 Burruss Hall beginning at 12:15 p.m.

Budget Effects on Commencement Ceremonies
Before the discussion began, the three proposals noted below were handed out to the members of the committee. Members were being asked to review the proposals and make recommendations on ways to reduce the commencement budget in anticipation of more stringent budget cuts from the state to higher education.

Proposal #1:
Permanently eliminate the setup of Rector Field House for the College of Human Resources and Education ceremony in the spring. This is the only college or department to have a ceremony in that venue. The only other space large enough to accommodate this ceremony is Cassell Coliseum, where the spring ceremonies are currently held for the Colleges of Business and Engineering. (Note: Currently, Staff Appreciation Day, which is held in Rector Field House the Wednesday following spring commencement, benefits from no setup fee.) Net Savings: $22,000

Option 1: Move the CHRE ceremony to the Coliseum and add it to the rotation schedule with the Colleges of Engineering and Business. This would mean having one of the three ceremonies on Friday night or adding a later ceremony on Saturday.
Option 2: Move the University Ceremony to late Friday afternoon (e.g., 4:00 p.m.), thus allowing college ceremonies to begin earlier on Saturday. The Graduate School ceremony could be scheduled to follow the university ceremony on Friday evening, (e.g., 6:00 p.m.) If this change is made, it should be considered a permanent change.

Proposal #2:
Eliminate/reduce contributions to college receptions to reduce costs. This can be a temporary measure until the budget situation improves later in the decade. The President’s Office currently provides a nominal $5 per graduating student, for a total of approximately $32,000. This contribution is more of a token and does not come close to the colleges’ actual cost. Note: Some colleges may be contemplating eliminating reception as a cost-saving measure.

Proposal #3:
Eliminate the fall commencement ceremonies (graduate and university) for the next several years as a cost-saving measure, with the understanding that the fall ceremonies would be restored when the budget recovers. Cost Savings: $32,000 plus overtime among Registrar’s staff and college and President’s Office staff who work with commencement.

Committee Discussion on the Above Budget-Reducing Proposals

Proposal #1 Discussion
To begin, Henneke and Beach provided some background on why the College of Human Resources and Education ceremony came to be located in the Field House. Originally, Human Resources’ ceremony was held in Burruss, and the College of Education’s in the Gym. When the colleges were combined, the ceremony became too large to house in either location. The first option was to have all three colleges’ ceremonies (CHRE, COB, COE) in the Coliseum, but the colleges did not want all ceremonies to be held on the same day, because of the lateness of the last ceremony.

Beach voiced the concern that even without budget restrictions the Field House capacity is at its limit of 3600, and there have been increasing problems with the fire marshal regarding the numbers allowed inside. The port-a-floor is also at an advanced stage of wear and may only last two more years. This is a very expensive cost that the President’s Office and Athletics shared a few years ago, but will be a hidden cost concern in the coming years.

Henneke stated that the committee should really consider the decision for Proposal #1 to be a permanent one to save expenses in future years and to remove the fire safety concerns.

Another committee member voiced the concern that the Field House is very hot in the spring, there are only port-a-potties available for guest use, and everyone would probably prefer to be in a different location.

Option 1: Move the spring CHRE ceremony to the Coliseum and rotate with Business and Engineering. This would mean that the university ceremony would begin at 9:00 a.m. in Lane Stadium with the first college ceremony beginning in the Coliseum at 11:00 a.m., followed by a 1:30 p.m. ceremony, and the last being held at 4:30 p.m.
Or, one of the college ceremonies could be held on Friday afternoon/evening. The committee felt there might be strong opposition from the colleges to move one of their ceremonies to Friday.

Option 2:  
Move the university ceremony to Friday afternoon, allowing the three colleges to have their ceremonies on Saturday (with a rotating schedule). It was voiced that there may be opposition from students and parents that could not be here on Friday afternoon for the university ceremony. But, it was also mentioned that the most important ceremony was the college ceremony, where students are actually called by name to come forward. In addition, the university ceremony is where the degrees are actually conferred, starting the remaining ceremonies on a good foot. College ceremonies on Saturday could be held at 8:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m., and 1:30 p.m., ending no later than the schedule currently set in the spring.

Another advantage would be that the stage party members for the graduate and university ceremonies would need to be present on one day only, lessening time commitment. The University might need to close offices by 3 p.m. for a 4 p.m. ceremony. Based on the fact that Commissioning is held on Friday afternoon, the ROTC would need to be notified to discuss their scheduling concerns.

Hincker indicated he would be concerned about traffic on Friday, and would prefer that one of the colleges hold their ceremony on Friday, rather than move the university ceremony. Ridinger felt traffic would be confined to the stadium area. McKee noted that beginning the university ceremony in the fresh morning air seems to signify a new beginning. Weather concerns voiced by Ridinger and Henneke confirmed that there are more storms early in the morning, and Hincker indicated it would be easier to cancel (i.e., relocate to the Coliseum) a Friday afternoon ceremony, rather than a Saturday morning one.

The committee decided to act only on the proposal itself (discontinuing use of the Field House) and continue discussion of the options at the next meeting after the colleges and students had the chance to provide input. The committee unanimously approved to discontinue the use of the Field House for safety reasons and an estimated savings of $22,000.00.

Proposal #2 Discussion
It was stated earlier that the President’s Office provides colleges with approximately $32,000 per year in monies to bolster each college’s own funding for post-event receptions. With the severe budget cuts expected, Henneke noted that the College of Engineering had planned to eliminate funding the spring reception and Taylor noted the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences would likely do the same. Goodrich indicated that the colleges were sensitive to the monies provided for their receptions, but that as in the case of the Graduate School, you get so little in the way of a nice reception due to the expensive costs related to having a catered event. Another member stated that the colleges at this point are much more concerned about other budget cuts than cuts for a ceremonial reception.

The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that each of the colleges consider eliminating its respective reception until the budget situation improves. Funding from the President’s Office could continue—though perhaps at a reduced level—for those college receptions that continue to be held.
Proposal #3 Discussion
Henneke began the discussion with some background information on why there is a fall commencement. Until 1989 or 1990, there was no fall commencement. There were a lot of summer graduates that did not return for the spring ceremony. Dr. McComas asked that the fall ceremony be instituted to accommodate these graduates. The first year ceremonies were very small, especially in the Graduate School. The second year, ceremonies in the Coliseum were fairly well attended with 400-500 graduates.

It was determined that there were two major concerns if the university proceeded to cancel fall commencement until the budget could be restored. One would be the effect on students and families, and two, the loss in revenue to businesses in the community.

Beach indicated that at the spring ceremonies, the Colleges of Business and Engineering are already at capacity on the floor, and if this were to be instituted, the added number of graduates in the spring could mean that many graduating students would need to be moved to the stands in the Coliseum to accommodate the additional numbers.

Henneke stated that if fall commencement were to be cancelled, it would need to be done this fall. Taylor noted that if we were going to do this, we needed to make the decision before it was too late. Taylor was concerned that hotel room bookings would not be refundable, and that many students and families had already made plans that could not be altered. Hincker would try to work with the Chamber of Commerce regarding the lodging situation.

Based on the continuing budget cuts to higher education, Hincker is concerned and believes that we need to make a public statement that cuts to higher education cannot continue without the effects being felt, not only at colleges, but in the community as well. We cannot continue business as usual. This cut would not be a cut in funding for colleges. This would be a cut to a ceremony, not to an academic program. Others agreed that there is a need to make a public statement. Yet, in doing so, we need to get the message across that we are not at fault here, but continuing budget cuts from Richmond are forcing these decisions.

Considerable discussion ensued. International students would most likely not be able to come back for a spring commencement ceremony, but it was also noted that the Registrar's Office said that quite a few students do wish to return in the spring for the May ceremony, even if they graduated in the fall. It was noted that not all universities have fall ceremonies. UVA does not have a fall ceremony, although another of the Virginia universities added a fall ceremony in recent years. A suggestion was made to see if families would be willing to pay to attend, but O'Rourke noted that the President would not want families to have to pay to attend commencement. The possibility of continuing the fall ceremony for one more year and then discontinuing it was discussed, but that scenario would not aid the current budget shortfall or draw the same attention to the seriousness of the university's financial situation. There was also concern that there were no students present (although they were encouraged to attend) to offer their perspective.

Henneke reminded the committee that its charge is to make recommendations to the President, and the President will make the final decision. However, the President needs the committee’s recommendation now because of the September 20 deadline for submission of the university’s budget reduction plans to Richmond.
The committee continued to discuss this proposal with Reaves stating strong objections to it while others continued to support it, not because they were for voting to have no fall commencement, but because they believed a ceremony has less priority than academic programs. To break the impasse, Hincker suggested the committee vote to endorse all three proposals in a priority order, depending upon the final level of budget cuts implemented by the state on our budget.

**The committee voted unanimously to endorse all proposals and to recommend to the President the following order of implementation based on the reduction target assigned to the university: First, implementation of Proposal #2, as amended by the committee (elimination/reduction of funding for college receptions); second, implementation of Proposal #1 (discontinued use of Rector Field House); third, Proposal #3 (elimination of Fall Ceremonies until budget situation improves).**

The meeting adjourned at 1:25 p.m.