Commencement Committee Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, September 6, 2006
12:15 p.m.
President’s Boardroom, 210 Burruss Hall

Present: Ed Henneke, Bill Stringer for Jerry Allen, Bud Brown, Michelle Czamanske, Russell Davis, Larry Hincker, Kathy Hosig, Jean Kampe, Brad Klein, Kim O’Rourke, John Beach for Lyndell Price, Dan Taylor, Linda Tegarden

Absent: Michael Dunleavy, Ellington Graves, Bill Green, Brian James, Brian Mihalik, Jerry Niles, Dixie Reaves, Susanna Rinehart, Dean Stauffer

Guests: Patrick Casey, Margie Murray, April Myers, Jennie Reilly

Dr. Henneke called the meeting to order at 12:18 p.m.

Approval of Minutes
With one change indicating the Green Engineering Program should be a concentration and not a minor, Brown moved that the minutes for the May 3, 2006, meeting be approved. With a second from Kampe, the minutes were approved unanimously.

Introduction of new committee members
Henneke requested introductions be made so that everyone can become familiar with each other.

Recap of Spring Commencement Ceremonies
The members of the committee were asked to share observations about the operations of the spring ceremony. Taylor indicated that there was some congestion due to the construction, but now that the stadium is complete this should not be a problem in the future.

Numbering of Fall/Spring Ceremonies
Henneke and Hincker provided some background about the confusion surrounding the number of the Commencement. The issue is what should be printed on the Commencement program cover: the year of the university or the number of the Commencement. In 1984, the program read the 112th Annual Commencement and each year the number was increased by one. In the early 1990’s the university started having fall ceremonies. In the mid to late nineties, it was recognized that there was not a ceremony held for one or two years during World War II. It was determined that the University was established in 1872 and the first Commencement Ceremony was in 1875. Because of the uncertainty, the Commencement Committee decided that the year of the university should be used on the program, starting with the 1997-1998 year. For two years, the academic year was used, and then somehow, we reverted back to using the Commencement number on the program and have continued that practice.

A question was also brought up as to what academic year the fall graduates will be graduating in. It was indicated by the Alumni Association that the students graduating this fall want to be part of the 2006 Senior Class, not the 2007 Senior Class. Kampe stated that if the students have submitted their credentials for graduation, then the registrar’s office should indicate in what academic year the student is graduating.

Henneke called for a motion from the floor to revive the resolution passed in the late 1990s saying that each Commencement program will say the ______ year of the university. O’Rourke seconded the motion. With no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.
Presentation of University Awards at the Spring University Ceremony

Henneke distributed copies of a letter he received from President Steger (see attached) asking for the Commencement Committee’s input regarding a recommendation he had received from a small committee that has been looking at ways to restructure Founders Day. Henneke explained that since there is no longer a Founders Day ceremony held in the spring, for the past two years, the University has conferred the Ruffner Medal, the University Distinguished Achievement (UDA) Award, and the Alumni Distinguished Service (ADS) Awards (2-3) at the spring Commencement Ceremony. Historically, the university has conferred the University Distinguished Achievement Award at the spring Commencement Ceremony. However, Henneke voiced concern that the decision to add the remaining awards for those two years was made without input from the Commencement Committee. Further, he pointed out that the purpose of Commencement is to honor the graduates and not to present awards. In the discussion that ensued, O’Rourke explained that the reason for the recommendation is to give the award recipients—who have built distinguished careers and often performed extraordinary service to the university—an appropriate audience, and to inspire the graduates as to what they can accomplish after graduation. This is a common practice at other universities, although O’Rourke favored keeping the number of awards to a small number. While most of the award recipients are alumni, that is not a requirement for either the Ruffner or the UDA award. None of the award recipients would be given an opportunity to speak at the Commencement Ceremony; they would have an opportunity to do that at a small dinner hosted by the president the night before. O’Rourke noted that the presentation of the four awards (Ruffner, UDA, and two Alumni Distinguished Service Awards) at the spring 2006 Commencement Ceremony took a total of nine minutes. A question arose as to whether the number of ADS awards could be limited to two (some years there are three), and O’Rourke indicated that this could be discussed with Vice President Tillar. The Commencement Committee will give the matter further thought and act at the October meeting.

Presentation of Master’s Diplomas at the Graduate School Ceremony

Henneke recalled that the Commencement Committee passed a motion in April 2006 recommending strongly that master’s diplomas be presented to students during the spring ceremony beginning as soon as feasible. This did not occur at the spring 2006 ceremony. The master’s degree candidates are the only graduates that do not get their diplomas at the spring ceremony. They may pick up the diplomas immediately after the ceremony at the Graduate Life Center. The Graduate School states the reason the master’s diplomas are not handed out during the ceremony is due to the time it takes to get the diplomas ready. The Graduate School also indicated that there are around 250-300 master’s degree students that participate in the spring ceremony. However, it was pointed out that the number of students that attend may increase if they receive their diplomas at the ceremony. The Graduate School ceremony used to be held in Squires and was only for the Ph.D. students. When Squires became too small a venue for the Graduate School ceremony, it was decided to allow the ceremony to be held in Cassell Coliseum. The coliseum was too big a venue for just the Ph.D. students and it was decided to add the master’s degree candidates as part of the Graduate School ceremony. For the last two or three ceremonies in the spring, the Graduate School decided that it was not feasible to hand out the master’s diplomas at the ceremony. Henneke indicated because there was no representative from the Graduate School present, this matter will be placed on the agenda for further discussion at the next meeting.

Other Items from the Committee

Taylor sends out an annual survey to the ushers for comments on how they felt the ceremony went. The survey results will be sent out to the committee members for their information.

Murray stated that there are a couple of issues with regard to the Commencement website. The first issue is that a guide to graduation on the Registrar’s website does not link to the official
Commencement website. It is also difficult to find the official Commencement website. It was suggested that a link be added to the Virginia Tech homepage for Commencement information. Murray indicated that parents have questions about Commencement all year long regarding accommodations, pictures, regalia, etc. Hincker stated that he would look into getting a link added to the homepage.

Henneke announced that the next meeting will be the first Wednesday in October.

With no other business, Hincker moved to adjourn at 12:58 p.m.
September 4, 2006

Dr. Edmund Hennenke
Chair, Commencement Committee
College of Engineering
339 Norris Hall
C campus (0217)

Dear Ed:

A small committee has been considering how Founders Day might be re-structured, and they have provided me with a series of recommendations. My purpose in writing is to ask for the Commencement Committee's input with regard to one of those recommendations.

First, let me provide some background. Traditionally, the University Distinguished Achievement Award is conferred at the University Commencement in the spring. This has consisted of reading a citation and placing the medal around the neck of the recipient; the recipient does not make any remarks. In contrast, the Ruffner Medal, which is the university's highest award, was conferred at Founders Day, along a number of other alumni, faculty, staff, and student awards.

Because the number of awards that were being conferred at Founders Day made that ceremony extremely long, about five years ago, Founders Day was divided into three distinct university events: a Student Honors Banquet (held in the spring), a Faculty/Staff Awards Ceremony (held in the fall), and the Founders Day Convocation (still held in the spring). The Student Honors Banquet and the Faculty/Staff Awards Ceremony were highly successful. However, the Founders Day Convocation at which the Ruffner Medal and the Alumni Distinguished Service Awards (typically three) were given struggling. Despite the intensive preparations that were invested in producing Founders Day, few members of the university community attended.

The most troubling situation was that with an embarrassingly low turnout, the recipients of the university's highest awards—people who had supported this university for decades through thick and thin with their time and financial resources—were not being honored by the university community in the manner they deserved. (*Note: A sampling of the individuals who have received the Ruffner Medal and the University Distinguished Achievement Award over the past ten years is provided at the end of this letter to give a sense of the stature of the recipients.)

As a result, in 2005, we suspended the Founders Day Convocation (pending a review of the ceremony) and instead honored the recipients of the University Distinguished Achievement Award, the Ruffner Medal, and the three Alumni Distinguished Service Awards in what we hoped would be a more fitting and meaningful way. In the spring of 2005 and 2006, on the night before the University Commencement, I hosted a dinner in their honor to which university officials and the recipients' families were invited. Each of the recipients was recognized, and each had an opportunity to make comments at the dinner. The next day, the award recipients processed as members of the stage party and were given their awards on stage in front of an audience of thousands at the University Commencement in Lane Stadium. The venue seemed most fitting not only for the honorees, but also for the graduating students, who, it is hoped, would be inspired by their good works and accomplishments.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Steger
President

* Ruffner Medal Recipients
Clifton C. Gavin, Jr. (1987) — Engineering alumnus, retired chairman and CEO of Exxon Corporation, and former Rector of Virginia Tech's Board of Visitors.

* University Distinguished Achievement Award Recipients