Commencement Committee Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, October 5, 2005
12:15 p.m.
President’s Boardroom, 210 Burruss Hall

Present: Dan Taylor, Sumeet Bagai, Bill Stringer for Jerry Allen, Jerry Via for Bud Brown, Quinton Nottingham for Deborah Cook, Russell Davis, Sam Easterling, Larry Hincker, Brad Klein, Kim O’Rourke, Lyndell Price, Dixie Reaves, Dean Stauffer

Absent: Ed Henneke, Karen DePauw, Jerry Gibson, Ellington Graves, Bill Green, Jean Kampe, Brian James, Jerry Niles

Guests: Patrick Casey, April Myers, Carole Nickerson, Jennie Reilly, Eric Wininger

Dr. Taylor chaired the meeting in the absence of Dr. Henneke. He called the meeting to order at 12:17 p.m.

Approval of Minutes
Easterling moved that the minutes for the September 7, 2005, meeting be approved as written. With a second from Bagai, the minutes were approved unanimously.

Selection of student speakers for University Commencement Ceremony
Taylor introduced Carole Nickerson, who held the position which is now titled Chief of Staff to the president for twelve years. She explained that the Spring Commencement of 1989 was universally regarded as the worst Commencement debacle the university had ever seen. The situation created a lot of negative publicity for the university.

Dr. McComas, who was president at that time, decided to form a task force to examine what needed to be done to have a successful ceremony. The task force was given the better part of a year to make recommendations on ways to improve the ceremony. Dr. McComas indicated that if the task force did not come up with a change of plan that would make the ceremony more dignified and celebratory, he would prefer to not have the ceremony at all. After months of reviewing the ceremonies of other universities and interviewing different groups on campus, the task force came up with what is used today.

The task force recommended that the students sit on the field instead of the in the stands, where they had sat previously. By doing this, the ceremony was made to be more impressive and helped to get away from a “football” atmosphere.

It was also decided to contract Stage Sound to provide a speaker system which supplied real sound to everyone, including the students. Not being able to hear the ceremony was one of the factors contributing to poor student behavior.

The task force also recommended having student participation in the ceremony. There were several proposals as to what should be the selection process. The student members of the task force did not want students chosen that were already favorably known to the administration, award winners, or students chosen by faculty playing favorites. The students wanted representatives that were typical students. They proposed that the student speakers should be chosen from among the class officers because this was the only way to have a truly representative group of students from which to select. The class officers hold that position for life and being the student speakers for Commencement helps aid in future alumni relations and events by giving them exposure on stage and in the program.
Nickerson indicated that this arrangement has worked very well, and the quality of the student remarks have been uniformly very good.

O’Rourke questioned whether there were ever any questions from any students about the selection process after the changes were implemented. Nickerson stated that was never any questions about the process, but she has heard that recently there has been a suggestion that the Board of Visitors representative should be the speaker. Nickerson stated that in her opinion, the representatives to the board are not necessarily representative of students in general because the board, not the student body, chooses the student representatives.

Bagai then suggested that before surveying the students on the selection of student speakers, the class officer for 2006, 2007, and 2008 met to evaluate the process of why the class officers were chosen to be the speakers at the Commencement ceremony. Bagai indicated that there are several different student leaders on campus, but the only group elected solely to represent one class is the class officers. Because of the online voting systems, over half of the class participates in class officer elections.

Bagai then informed the committee that the responsibility of the class officers is to take their class and tie it in to Virginia Tech while on campus and as alumni. He then indicated that the biggest task the class system has is to coordinate the ring tradition since over half of the class buys a class ring. The class officers gather information from class surveys to incorporate student ideas and suggestions for the ring. The ring premier, the ring dance, and a kickoff concert to get students excited about the class ring are events that culminate with the Senior Celebration and with graduation. Bagai then indicated that class officers are closely advised by Tom Tillar and Debbie Day in Alumni because the class officers will play a key role after graduation helping to organize reunions.

Bagai concluded that because the responsibilities of class officers are solely to their class, it is logical for the class officers to participate in the Commencement ceremony as the student speakers.

Casey questioned if there are hesitations to surveying the class. Bagai indicated that he is not sure what the response rate would be, and the class officers did not want to create unnecessary questions from the student class. Bagai confirmed that the class officers have not been questioned by anyone from the student body at large about the selection process of student speakers; thus, it does not appear to be an issue among the student population.

O’Rourke indicated that to her knowledge only one or two students have ever questioned the selection process of the student speakers.

Taylor summarized that there does not appear to be a reason to change the way student speakers are chosen for the Commencement ceremony, and no action from the committee is indicated. The class officers will remain the students to speak during the Commencement ceremony.
Planning for Fall Commencement
Price indicated that he needed funds in order to begin the process. O’Rourke indicated that she would get the proper forms to him.

O’Rourke then mentioned that the brochure would be mailed out by the end of October. She also indicated that the Commencement website and hotline are up to date.

Taylor indicated that he would be getting the recruiting memo out to the ushers and marshals soon. Reaves reminded the college representatives to make sure that those on the volunteer list know they are volunteering.

O’Rourke requested the faculty names being recommended for the Commencement speaker, and Bagai stated he would get that information to her.

Casey questioned whether or not he was the music liaison for the Fall Commencement ceremony. Myers confirmed that he was the contact person for any part of the ceremony pertaining to music.

Reilly indicated that there is a staff meeting with the ADA architect to discuss signage for the ceremony, and she will get that information in time for the printing of the brochure. Price indicated that he would need a few weeks’ notice in order to complete the signs.

Price stated that he would need to know if the musicians would be providing their own lighting on stage or if Physical Plant would need to provide the lighting. Casey indicated that he will get that information soon.

O’Rourke questioned the condition of the carpet, and Price indicated that it is okay.

With no other business, O’Rourke moved to adjourn at 12:50 p.m.