March 12, 2013

Good evening.

I’d like to begin my report with yet another success story for our VVC faculty. Hinrich Kaiser, professor in Biology, recently returned from sabbatical. For those who don’t know, sabbaticals are a necessary recharging tool for faculty to continue their discipline research and bring back to VVC the results of their research to assist students in their educational goals. Professor Kaiser has submitted an exhaustive sabbatical report that I was privileged to examine last week. In this report, Professor Kaiser charted his accomplishments in East Timor and elsewhere in the world. His report included research on the 4-toed skink and the bent-toed gecko. In addition, he wrote several abstracts and articles, including one entitled “Fantastic Voyage: a blindsnake’s journey through a toad’s gastrointestinal system”, complete with pictures illustrating what is apparently a rare occurrence for toads in this region. Perhaps one of the best inclusions in the sabbatical report was Professor Kaiser’s appointment as a research collaborator for the Smithsonian Institution.

In addition, I want to highlight another ongoing success story, the aptly-named Math Success Center. Currently we have 8 full-time faculty and three part-time faculty volunteering their time in this important lab. There is a continuous influx of new students into the success center, illustrating both the commitment of students and faculty to supporting student success at VVC.

As the Academic Senate President – not a union leader, as has been recently stated – my concerns involve academic and professional matters. The AS is constantly working to inform, assist and empower faculty in achieving excellence in education. As I have noted several times since I began my term this last Fall, faculty have been tirelessly working to address ACCJC concerns. Contrary to negative statements made publicly about VVC faculty and other constituent groups, I can attest to the high level of dedication full- and part-time faculty have to continuous quality improvement. Moreover, all our faculty are committed to education not only for training a workforce, but
education for its own sake, so our students can think for themselves and become well-rounded individuals, not simply worker bees who do what they are told, no matter how unreasonable. Do we want a society of unthinking individuals who believe everything they’re told? Or, do we want constructive dialog and analysis, appropriate questions of policy and leaders? As a historian, I directly see a line here to the principles of the American Revolution, when educated individuals, spurred by Enlightenment principles, questioned people and laws they felt made no sense...and created our fine country, where we are respectful of others without tearing them down for our own purposes, and where education is affordable.

I think the BoT may not be fully aware of the challenges faculty faced in the last year with assessing SLOs. Personally, I remember receiving conflicting information as to what ACCJC wanted, and how they wanted it: data, no a narrative instead, no data again. This has been going on for over five years, and each time, faculty have adjusted. Even today, in talking with a faculty during a PLO workshop, we all agreed that conflicting information led to hours of wasted work when new requirements were passed on to faculty. This was frustrating, to say the least. I cannot tell you how much data was either deemed irrelevant or unnecessary after it had been compiled...and then had to be thrown out, and a ‘new’ process started. It’s as if faculty were asked to construct a building with one set of plans, constructing the building, then told, “no, this is wrong...tear it down and build it again. And, by the way, we’re going to fine you for building it the old way...even though we told you to build it that way originally.” This conflicting information is not the fault of VVC administration...it was coming from the ACCJC. What is even more worrisome for faculty is that the ACCJC standards are being rewritten yet AGAIN...meaning in the next cycle, a whole new set of recommendations may invalidate what we’ve accomplished now. I was told today that the SLO/TracDat/Curricunet facilitator has been informed that there is no funding for workshops to learn the latest developments and recommendations. Will VVC suffer for this lack of funding and information?
In addition, I am not sure that the BoT are fully aware of the broader challenges faculty face every day in the CC classroom. There has been a decline in college readiness over the last several years; this means that many students we face are not only first-time college attendees, but that they are unprepared for college-level work. There is no one group or person to ‘blame’ for this...it is several factors personal to individual students as well as a K-12 system forced to standardize, with the implication that all students learn the same way at the same time. Any teacher can tell you, that is flawed reasoning.

But it goes beyond this: being a **public** institution, we take whoever walks through the door. Unlike a private business, where you can choose – or, as it states in many businesses “we have the right to refuse service to anyone” – we have no choice. We are a COMMUNITY college, and accept all who apply, no matter what their educational goals or educational level. This means that, in some programs, student assessments will not be as high as we would like. It also means that in a classroom of 25-35 students – of all ages and backgrounds – one teacher has to deliver course content several ways so students can demonstrate proficiency. That’s why many faculty hold workshops for their students on their OWN time, create study groups, meet with students beyond posted office hours, answer e-mails day and night...the list goes on. And this is in addition to compiling SLO Ass data, committee work, attending department and other related meetings, scheduling, grading, class preparation...again, the list goes on and on.

Please note: this necessary background is not an excuse or assigning blame. This is the **reality** of public education today. The faculty at VVC, despite being questioned as to competence, as well as other negative labels, actually CARE. And that care means that they work above and beyond their contract on a daily basis to help their students and this institution.
Thank you.