


ORBIS



Amplifying Vanderbilt's
Progressive Voices

Vol. 9/No.2/October/2009

CONFUSING THE ISSUES?



LGBTQI Office & Women's Center
under one director, page 6

Metro passes non-discrimination ordinance, page 4

a note from the editor

I'd like to take the opportunity in this note to discuss the article featured on the cover (p. 6). This summer, the university named Nora Spencer the new director of the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center. Spencer was previously the director of the Office of LGBTQI Life. She will now run both centers simultaneously.

Some community members worry that the responsibilities of these two centers are too great for one person to effectively handle. Others feel that bringing the two centers under one director conflates the missions and goals of two distinct operations.

In writing this article, my intention is not to stir up more controversy on an already contentious issue. Both the Women's Center and the LGBTQI Office are instrumental in advocating progressive policies on campus. Spencer and the university administration feel the changes implemented will strengthen both centers' access to resources and opportunities for collaboration.

This story is not designed to be a critique on individuals. Instead, it attempts to clear up misconceptions about the centers' changes and to provide a full picture of what happened over the summer.

In conducting my interviews and investigation this past month, it was apparent to me that people on both sides of the debate are passionate about advancing gender and sexuality issues on campus. Moving forward, I hope that the conversations surrounding both centers will be focused on how to best serve their constituent groups. If you are interested in the future of the Women's Center or the LGBTQI Office, I encourage you to speak with the administration or the center employees about your concerns and suggestions.

-Erika Hyde

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Amplifying Vanderbilt's Progressive Voices

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Please recycle.

- S** 03. Spotlight on campus green groups
By John Chen
- t** 04. City passes anti-discrimination bill
By Allie Diffendal
- r** 05. Kids' films evoke environmental concerns
By Jon Christian
- e** 06. Women's Center under new leadership
By Erika Hyde
- t** 08. Why Obama is not a socialist
By Richard Williams
- r** 09. Redefining social progress
By Ben Wibking
- o** 10. Greeks give back to the community
By Steve Harrison
- o** 11. Frat row disrupts the freshman experience
By David Yampolsky
- o** 12. Issues: Is the Commons improving student acclimation?
By Carol Chen and Tian Song

4345 number of American military deaths in Iraq since March 2003

Cover design: Sam Abney

What is Orbis?

Orbis aspires to change the atmosphere on Vanderbilt's campus and provides a voice for liberal, multicultural and minority viewpoints. This publication strives to inform the public about issues that these groups face as well as to promote diversity and unity within our community. It is a forum for discussion of social, political and religious commentary relevant to Vanderbilt, the nation and the world. Orbis was founded by a coalition of students seeking to raise consciousness about diverse ideas, cultures and backgrounds in our society. We hope to challenge the existing social atmosphere at Vanderbilt and promote a rebirth of acceptance.

Student recycling efforts ramp up

Students at Vanderbilt are using their talents and skills to take action against one of the greatest challenges facing the world: the environmental crisis. Orbis would like to show some love for two environmental activist groups on campus. Their members are working hard this year to teach Vanderbilt students and administrators how to be green. -by John Chen

SPEAR

Students Promoting Environmental Awareness and Recycling (SPEAR) has been the voice of Mother Nature at Vanderbilt since 2003. Through their green projects and educational events, they seek to promote environmental awareness among the student body. In addition, SPEAR strives to “work closely with the administration... to maximize available resources in the quest for sustainability,” said SPEAR president Leslie Labruto.

SPEAR’s past efforts include a 2004 campaign for green LEED-certified dorms at the Commons, a 2006 comprehensive trash audit of Vanderbilt campus, and a 2007 Biodiesel Initiative.

Already this year, SPEAR has recycled 6.7 tons of cardboard from students’ move-in, continued a compost project at the Commons, and partnered with the Sierra Club to bring the first Eco-Fashion show to Vanderbilt.

Their upcoming projects include a campus-wide energy competition, a seminar series on environmental sustainability, a Water Bottle Reduction Initiative, Earth week events, Rites of Spring recycling, and a program to show the “Kilowatt Ours” documentary to elementary school children.

Labruto encourages students to get involved by attending meetings every other Monday at 8 p.m. in Buttrick 201.

www.studentorgs.vanderbilt.edu/spear

ECO-DORES

Vanderbilt’s brand new environmental program is a joint effort by the Sustainability and Environmental Management Office (SEMO) and the Dean of Students Office. Unlike a traditional student organization, Eco-Dores is an application-based program run by the administration.



Cardboard recycling at the Commons after move-in.

Photo: SPEAR website

The program advisers, Kendra Abkowitz (SEMO staff) and Abigail Richards, an intern at the Office of Housing and Residential Education, envision 34 Eco-Dores—one student from each residence hall—serving as “peer educators.”

Eco-Dores are required to complete ten hours of community service per

month as well as participate in monthly educational sessions, with each session introducing a different topic. The Eco-Dores will then “devise their own educational program around that month’s topic that will interest the students in their residence halls,” explained Abkowitz. Possible themes include water and energy conservation, recycling, consumption, carbon footprint and climate change, sustainable food, transportation, and green building.

Abkowitz cited similar environmental peer education programs at Tufts, Duke, and Harvard. The success of these programs helped spur the administration to create Eco-Dores at Vanderbilt.

Find SEMO online at:

www.vanderbilt.edu/sustainvu

It will be interesting to see if these two environmental organizations will collaborate on any efforts this year. Although SPEAR has the advantage of being a long-established organization, Eco-Dores has direct ties to the administration.

Aside from LEED certification of the Commons, Vanderbilt also received a 2005 Tennessee Green Schools Award from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. Hopefully, environmental awareness will continue to be an important issue on campus, and Vanderbilt will become increasingly recognized as a green school.

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Metro passes non-discrimination ordinance

By Allie Diffendal
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

An ordinance prohibiting the Metropolitan Government from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity through its employment practices passed by a 24-15 vote in its third and final reading at Metro Council's Sept. 15 meeting. The first legislation of its kind in Tennessee, the non-discrimination ordinance (Bill No. BL2009-502) passed six years after a similar bill introduced by then Metro Council member Chris Ferrell was defeated by former Vice Mayor Howard Gentry in a dramatic tie-breaking vote.

Fortunately for Nashville's gay and lesbian community, this year's bill did not receive nearly the amount of criticism and stark opposition that its previous incarnation faced. According to the Nashville Scene, the 2003 non-discrimination bill incited courthouse protests and bigoted anti-gay commentary that generally created an environment that even the bill's killer labeled "one of the low points in our city's history."

However, passage of this year's ordinance was not without its share of antagonism from social conservative zealots.

This year's opposition surfaced in many forms – the introduction of a watered-down bill prohibiting discrimination based on "non-merit factors," evangelical e-mail campaigns warning of horrific ramifications, and in one Metro council meeting, council members' social conservative reasoning that homosexuality is an unhealthy "lifestyle choice."

Proponents of the enacted non-discrimination bill asserted that the competing bill based on "non-merit factors" (Bill No. BL2009-529) remained too broad to be legally applicable in its original form. Thus, at its second reading on Sept. 15, council member Phil Claiborne added "sexual orientation" and Erik Cole added "gender identity" to the language of 529. "If the sponsors of this bill want to include everything that's in 502," said Cole, "then all factors there should be included." The amended bill, co-sponsored by Claiborne and Sam Coleman, passed its second reading by a 28-11 vote.

E-mail campaigns against 502 conducted by the Tennessee chapters of the Rev. James Dobson's Family Action Council and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle

Forum flooded council members' inboxes with sensationalist inaccuracies. In one such e-mail, the organizations alleged that the ordinance would force people to use courthouse restrooms along with cross dressers, and it would require the city to pay for individuals' sex-change operations. Of course, the bill in question is strictly limited to employment practices; it merely prohibits the city from basing hiring, firing, or promoting decisions



Metro meeting with the votes in background.

Photo: H.G. Stovall, TN Equality Project President

on a person's gender identity or sexual orientation.

At the meeting prior to the ordinance's enactment, Tusculum representative Jim Hodge refused to "support or endorse a lifestyle that is unhealthy," comparing homosexuals' ability to abandon their sexuality to the will power to quit smoking or to stay on a diet. Implying that homosexuality is simply a bad habit that one can choose to quit, Hodge said, "I would think that we as a government should be encouraging our folks to make better lifestyle choices than this. I will vote no."

Bill Newsome, a constituent of Antioch council member Duane Dominy, told the Nashville Scene about a similar form of bigotry he encountered at a lunch meeting with Dominy. According to Newsome, the council member stated that he planned to oppose the ordinance because homosexuality "could be construed in a court of law to mean bestiality and pedophilia."

Despite these attempts to derail the legislation, many Nashville residents and their Metro repre-

sentatives fervently supported the bill. (Indeed, even Mayor Karl Dean supported the ordinance, in stark contrast to former Mayor Bill Purcell, who in 2003 refused to take a position and later declared the ordinance unconstitutional.) As Nashville joins the more than 170 cities and counties around the country that already have similar laws on the books, at-large council member and lead sponsor Megan Barry thinks that "we're definitely slow to the party" in enacting a common non-discrimination policy.

"We want to attract and retain some of the best talent in Metro Government to make this city great," said Barry, "and the fact that we would not provide that protection is embarrassing." On a more personal note, Barry added, "I really believe that as a Metro Council person we have a responsibility to the Metro employees of this community to make sure that they're protected from discrimination – period."

With an "overwhelming response" of thirteen other sponsors, Barry was not alone in her acknowledgement of the need for this inclusive non-discrimination policy. Many supporters viewed the changes in the council's roster, resulting in the removal of members passionately opposed to the 2003 bill, as reflective of the sentiments of progressive Nashvillians.

"I think that what we've seen in Davidson County, not only with the mayor that we have but also with the new councils that came on with tremendous energy for wanting to create a place that is warm, welcoming and diverse – and we've seen it with the defeat of English-only, the passage of a non-discrimination ordinance... I think that's directly a result of the fact that we have the voters to put in folks like me because that's what the voters want," said Barry, who has held a council seat since 2007.

Progressive organizations both on and off Vanderbilt's campus – including the Tennessee Transgender Political Coalition, the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), and Vanderbilt's own Lambda Association – conducted letter writing campaigns to council members in support of the ordinance prior to the final vote.

TEP President H.G. Stovall co-hosted a letter-writing party with Lambda on Sept. 10 to thank council members who had voted for the ordinance on its second reading. Taking their cause to campus, Stovall and Lambda members asked

Vanderbilt students to sign their name to a mass e-mail. "Sometimes students are not aware of what's going on off Vanderbilt's campus... but everybody we came in contact with willingly put their name on the letter," said Lambda President Reanne Zheng, "and the reaction was mainly, 'Well, of course I'll support that. I mean, why wouldn't I?'"

Vanderbilt itself joined a list of more than 50 organizations and institutions publicly endorsing the ordinance. In an August press release, Chancellor Zeppos said, "Vanderbilt has had a similar non-discrimination policy in place for several years, and it reflects the kind of open, inclusive and tolerant environment that Vanderbilt strives to create and that our faculty, staff, students

and visitors expect. The proposed Metro ordinance likewise sends a positive message about the city, which Vanderbilt so proudly calls home." Beth Fortune, the Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs, told Orbis that the university endorsed the ordinance as an "important statement from an institution that already practices what the ordinance propose[d]."

While it is important to note that "gender identity" was not included in Vanderbilt's non-discrimination policy until last academic year, LGBTQI organizations on campus have noticed a significant difference in university policy since the policy's enactment. "Before having this [policy], gender-neutral housing wouldn't have happened," said Liz Scofield, president of the Human Rights

Campaign Vanderbilt, the campus organization that successfully campaigned for the policy addition two years ago. Vanderbilt's non-discrimination policy was the "first step," Scofield said, "but then, like two years later, we're already getting into this progressive view on housing, and though it is very limited... the fact that that's already happening at Vanderbilt says a lot about how quickly things are changing here."

In reference to the encouraging passage of the Metro ordinance and the larger fight for equal rights, Scofield added, "Every little progress that we make is actually huge. So hopefully [Metro] will lead on that and start changing things." Lambda President Zheng agreed. At the very least, she said, "it's a step in the right direction."

Children's films encourage environmental awareness

By Jon Christian
COMMENTARY EDITOR

The City of Ember. WALL-E. 9. The motion picture industry is pursuing post-apocalyptic and environmentally charged children's films with unprecedented vigor – and the movies are getting darker, too. Maybe it's just a fad, or maybe marketing executives are again guilty of greenlighting an avalanche of similar projects that minimize risk and creativity, but I suspect a deeper theme. Facing the conflict between justified environmental angst and the numbing difficulty of sorting through the often deliberately confusing dialogue of issues in order to actively pursue change, a number of visionary directors have hit on thematic material that speaks both to the unvoiced fears of children and to the very tangible concerns of their parents.

At a family reunion in the early 1990s, a kindly aunt rented FernGully for my cousins and me. The first of a short burst of animated Fox titles of the period, it was filled with every tortuous plot element seemingly requisite for the period – fairies, giant robots, gooey antagonists – but with a strong, persistent sense of environmental concern that didn't fail to make an imprint on me. Specifics have become hazy over the years, but the startling imagery of rainforests toppled and harvested by infernal machinery haunts me to this day, especially every time I don't recycle.

The following decade saw a smattering of children's titles that followed up on ideas of environmental catastrophe. An extremely dubious spiritual sequel to FernGully (with anthropomorphic hedgehogs) was critically panned. Titan AE, which showed the Earth literally being blown up, has become a cult classic, and the technologically groundbreaking CGI feature Final Fantasy, set on

a bleak and wasted planet, was a box office bomb. Sometimes it seemed as though, while the narrative of global events wove a treacherous course between the bogeymen of global warming, radioactive waste and peak oil, children's films were repeatedly trying and failing to distill these general concerns into a message appropriate for a family film but not so cutesy that it denied the gravity of the stakes.

This all changed with Pixar's WALL-E in 2008. Critics almost universally praised director Andrew Stanton's vision of a planet so covered in trash that it had to be completely abandoned. The spunky, eponymous protagonist seems to represent a mixture of anthropomorphic foibles and a dedication to cleaning up the human beings' mess that puts the latter to shame. When he does finally meet people, far away from the polluted Earth, he finds a human race so pudgy and pampered that they must coast around on hovering La-Z-Boys – a stylistic choice that raised eyebrows among critics who wondered if such imagery might hit too close to home with a popcorn-gobbling crowd of moviegoers.

The essentially hopeful conclusion of WALL-E contrasts sharply with producer Tim Burton's latest effort, the much-hyped 9. In the film's story,

humanity – along with every other living thing, apparently – has been decimated by hostile artificial intelligences by the time the opening credits roll. Our heroes are lumpy, mechanized rag dolls who

are only trying to survive in a hostile, destroyed landscape populated by robotic villains. 9 is a dark film, rated a steep PG-13 for "violence and scary images," but its most chilling aspect is the aimless despair of the protagonists, who have no hope of improving their hostile world. From the outset, all the poor rag dolls can hope for is being slowly picked off by mechanical monsters beneath the smoggy sky of their awful, inherited home. The ending is ambiguous at best, and at worst existentially horrifying.

These films seem to have hit on a gold mine of environmental angst which speaks both to parents and children. Some, like 9, practically wallow in gloom,

while those like WALL-E have managed to redirect fear of environmental catastrophe into a weak kind of hope that ingenuity and love can triumph in the end.

I hope – perhaps for myself as well as for the kids – that before this trend runs its course there will be a film that capitalizes on this apparent zeitgeist of ecological apprehension to encourage the kind of action that can create meaningful change.



Photo: artwork for 9, one of a wave of new children's films with environmental themes.

Spencer becomes new Women's Center director

By Erika Hyde
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The university named Nora Spencer as the new director of the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center over the summer, one year after she came to Vanderbilt to head the new Office of LGBTQI Life. The university quickly quashed rumors about a possible merger of the two centers, but some people continue to be concerned by the implications of the decision. Spencer and the administration are working to maintain and improve the programming at both centers despite the transition and the controversy that brewed over the changes.

Background

The push for a new director at the Women's Center was sparked by the October 2008 resignation of Linda Manning, who had served as the center director for 11 years. In Manning's absence, Provost Richard McCarty appointed Pat Helland from the Office of the Dean of Students to serve as interim director, and a search committee was launched in February 2009 to find a permanent director. The committee did not find a suitable candidate in their local search, and it recommended in June that the search be expanded nationwide. The Provost's decision to hire Spencer as the new Women's Center director was announced on June 12.

At the same time, changes occurred to the Women's Center's reporting structure and personnel. The Center previously reported to the Chancellor, and more recently to the Office of the Provost. Beginning with Spencer's tenure as director, the center now reports to Sandy Stahl, Associate Dean of Students. On July 1, the day Spencer began working at the Women's Center, two employees at the center were terminated. A third employee resigned on July 17.

Announcement received mixed reactions

The announcement of Spencer's appointment over the Women's Center came as a surprise for many students. For some people, like former Vanderbilt Lambda Association president Klint Peebles, the decision posed a symbolic problem. "I definitely think it was a detrimental decision to have one director over both the LGBTQI Center and the Women's Center... I feel that it's a confla-

tion of the issues. To have any and all associations of women's issues with LGBT issues and vice versa-especially at Vanderbilt, in this geographical region-is a mistake," said Peebles.

Erica Santiago, the president of Vanderbilt Feminists and a member of the search committee tasked with finding the Women's Center director, shared Peebles' concerns. She launched a Facebook petition on June 12 urging the provost to continue the search for a director. According to the event details, over 150 people signed the petition that stated, "We believe that this move reflects a lack of concern for the status of women on campus and diminishes the time, energy, and resources avail-

the Women's Center. An external review of the center, conducted by women's center directors of peer institutions in spring 2008, found a perceived over-emphasis on addressing violence against women and recommended an enhanced commitment to risk reduction, outreach to men, and collaboration with other support providers. Provost McCarty was among the critics of the Center's focus, noting that its flagship program Project Safe was too limited in scope.

Observers like McCarty wanted the Center to engage in more collaboration with other campus resources, including the police department and the Psychological and Counseling Center. The Women's Center employees, on the other hand, stressed the importance of maintaining confidentiality for victims and providing access to all the options on campus for help, rather than forcing victims to choose a particular route.

Vicky Basra was the Project Safe director and Kacy Silverstein was its co-director. The Women's Center's other main program, Gender Matters, was directed by Stacy Nunnally. None of the three women still work at the center.

Search committee attempted to replace director

The university commissioned a search committee to find a new Women's Center director in February 2009. The search was local and the committee members included Nora Spencer, Erica Santiago, and Peabody Professor Ann Kaiser, who served as the chair. Kaiser did not respond to a request for comment.

Although the committee interviewed two potential directors, it concluded that the candidates were not a match for the job.

McCarty said he was motivated to fill the directorship quickly, which is why he did not act on the search committee's request to open the search nationwide. "If there is a person with the quality and experience available on campus, we have to go with that person—we go with the best interests of the university given the economic climate that we're in. A national search would have been too costly in terms of time," said McCarty.

Spencer did not lobby for the position. Instead, it was McCarty who approached Spencer about the added responsibilities at the Women's Center. "I'll be honest with you. There were many people who thought this was a bad idea. They had the luxury of not worrying about a center without a director.



Spencer will now direct both the K.C. Potter Center's Office of LGBTQI Life and the Women's Center (in background).

Photo: Erika Hyde/ORBIS

able to both the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center and the Office of LGBTQI Life."

Vanderbilt Human Rights Campaign vice president Ben Grimwood stated the initial negative reaction to the announcement may have been fueled by misinformation. "A lot of the controversy was based on people thinking that in some time, one center will get lost in the other, but they're still as independent as they ever were," said Grimwood.

The idea of merging the two centers was never on the table, according to Associate Dean Stahl and Provost McCarty.

Debate over programming and strategies

Even before the announcement of a new director, the administration was considering changes to

We see now how fortunate we are that Nora is in this position," added McCarty.

Personnel changes altered faces of Center

Silverstein, the Project Safe co-director, and Nunnally, the Gender Matters director, were terminated on July 1,

the first day of Nora Spencer's effective directorship at the Women's Center. Basra, the director of Project Safe, resigned on July 17 because she did not agree with many of the changes at the center.

Specifically, she believed that consolidating the two-person position of Project Safe into a single position wouldn't meet the needs of the students.

For observers like Klint Peebles, the employee changes exacerbated concerns over the direction of the center. "When you look at the qualifications of Kacy [Silverstein] and Stacy [Nunnally], and how much students trusted them, confided in them - to do away with that is horrible," said Peebles.

According to Nunnally and Silverstein, the university's Opportunity Development Center looked into the Women's Center following the personnel changes. The ODC, which interprets equal opportunity and affirmative action cases at Vanderbilt, would not confirm or deny the existence of the investigation due to the office's privacy policy.

McCarty, Stahl, Spencer and Helland declined to comment on personnel issues related to the Women's Center.

New reporting structure

When Nora Spencer became the new director of the Women's Center, the center also began reporting to the Dean of Students Office instead of the Office of the Provost. Pat Helland, interim director of the center, said these plans began to form while she was overseeing the center from November 2008 to June 2009.

One of the complaints that Helland heard regarding this reporting change was the concern that the Women's Center was being "shoved further down the food chain." Years ago, the Women's Center originally reported to the Office of the Chancellor. Until last year, it reported to

the Office of the Provost, and starting this year, it now reports to Associate Dean Stahl in the Dean of Students Office.

While Helland acknowledged these concerns, she believed that the additional resources and opportunities for collaboration provided by the large Dean of Students office would "open more doors" for a center that was previously "an island unto itself on campus."

Stahl agreed, stating that the colleague groups that became available to the Women's Center through the Dean's Office-including religious life, residential education, and the student organizations office-would help connect the center more directly with campus life.

The LGBTQI Office, Spencer's other responsibility, has reported to Stahl since it formed on campus last year. Stahl and Spencer speak daily about both centers, and the Provost meets with both women on a monthly basis.

Crisis Line problem?

The transition between the former members and the new directorship at the Women's Center was not entirely smooth, according to Kacy Silverstein. She said Project Safe's crisis and support phone line was forwarded to her cell phone from July 18 to September 9, when she was no longer a Vanderbilt employee. She said she received around seven calls from community members who called the number searching for help and resources.

Stahl said they are looking into this matter, and it was never the intention for anyone other than current center employees to receive the forwarded phone calls. Spencer said that she answered the calls to the support line throughout the summer

and the center has taken every effort to keep victim services intact. When Orbis called the support line phone number listed on the Project Safe website on September 7, the call was forwarded to a voice mail box belonging to 'Kacy.'

The future of both centers

Despite the initial controversy raised by the directorship decision, the employees at the Women's Center and the LGBTQI Office remain focused on both centers' programming and the student groups they intend to serve.

The Women's Center is helping its affiliated student groups reevaluate their missions and set up a new advisory system. Some of the groups, like Vandy Fems, are in a rebuilding stage as they meet with the Center employees and assess their future relationship with the Center.

In contrast, the LGBTQI groups may not be as drastically affected by the summer's changes, since they have existed independently from the office in the past. "Lambda's been here for 20 years, before the [K.C. Potter] center even existed. The center has only existed to us as a resource as of a year ago, so it won't affect us quite as much if Nora's attention is divided," said Vanderbilt Lambda Association president Reanne Zheng.

Both the Women's Center and the LGBTQI Office now have an associate director. The Women's Center has also hired one program coordinator for Project Safe and plans to staff the Gender Matters program by December. The addition of associate direc-

tors means Spencer will no longer be directly responsible for day-to-day administration and will instead focus on overarching programming goals as well as outreach to other departments on campus.



Nora Spencer (l), director of women's center and LGBTQI Office, and Provost Richard McCarty.



Photos: VUCast



Pat Helland (l), interim director of the women's center, and Sandy Stahl, Associate Dean of Students.



Photos: Dean of Students website

"The reality is that if the administration didn't think there was a need [for the Women's Center], they could have closed it. By keeping it, they're saying we still need these resources. This was a very positive thing and a step in the right direction," said interim director Helland.

Obama's policies are a far cry from socialism

By Richard Williams
STAFF WRITER

People seem to identify President Obama with quite a few traditional American bogeymen these days. He has been accused of being a Nazi, an Islamist, a hippie, and basically everything in between. The average person probably doesn't take these labels seriously. However, there is one that seems to have stuck to him in the popular imagination—that he is a “socialist.”

Since the McCarthy era, the Right has identified Democrats with socialists. Alongside common misapplications of the term to some foreign governments, this has led to the development of a rather skewed view of what constitutes socialism. Ask a random person what the word means, and you'll hear something along the lines of “big government,” “government control of key industries,” or, from virulent anti-communists, even “totalitarianism.”

Government control of industry can be a part of socialism, of course, but it is neither a necessary nor sufficient feature. In fact, a large offshoot of the historical socialist movement— anarchism—advocates the complete abolition of government.

What is socialism, if not government control? The socialist movement developed in the nineteenth century in response to the exploitative conditions of “Gilded Age” capitalism. It was an incredibly diverse movement, encompassing all sorts of ideas. Ricardian socialists wanted a modified free-market economy; Henri de Saint-Simon wanted a government-controlled meritocracy; Peter Kropotkin wanted a system of free communes with no centralized, hierarchical authority whatsoever; and the coauthors of “The Communist Manifesto,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, wanted temporary workers' states to replace the world's current governments.

One unifying principle ran through these differing perspectives: all socialists wanted the workers to control the means of production. They wanted to transfer ownership away from the current owners—the people known alternately as “the bourgeoisie,” “captains of industry” and “robber barons”—and give “the land to the cultivator, the mine to the miner, the tool to the laborer, the product to the producer,” in the words of French socialist Ernest Lesigne. The result would be the effective abolition of poverty and the expansion of

the workers' liberty to control their own lives, independent of an owner or boss.

So, does Obama want to institute workers' control of capital, also known as socialism? Theoretically, nationalization of industry could amount to workers' control of industry, since the workers make up the majority of the people and the majority is supposed to control the government. However, even if nationalization of industry could be regarded as a socialist policy, Obama has never advocated the steps that would be necessary to establish a sufficiently worker-controlled state. Indeed, even a prominent socialist like Engels saw this worker-control as an impossibility for governments as they exist today.

“The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine,” wrote Engels in 1877. “The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more

it actually becomes the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers—proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is, rather, brought to a head.”

If even full nationaliza-

Obama's presidency has seen an explosion of anti-government artwork. Photo: www.exposebarackobama.com

tion of all industries does not meet the requirements of socialism, something as mild as the addition of a public health care plan to the market—the most “socialistic” policy Obama has ever attempted to institute—surely falls short.

In Engels' view, government as it exists today must be dismantled and replaced with a new government to control the means of production. This government, known as a “workers' state” or the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” would be different from today's government in that it would be a direct democracy, with political power only delegated to representatives when absolutely necessary and with those representatives subject to instant recall at their constituents' whim.

Marx pointed to the Paris Commune of 1871 as a possible model for such a workers' state, writing, “The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally workers, or

acknowledged representatives of the working class.”

None of the safeguards that Marx and Engels considered necessary to maintain the democratic nature of the workers' state are on Obama's agenda. It should be apparent that the president does not want to nationalize all industry in America. Single-payer health care—which would amount to nationalization of one industry—was never even on the table with Obama, and he has recently signaled that he does not even consider such a “radical” measure as the establishment of a public option to compete with private plans to be an essential component of health care reform.

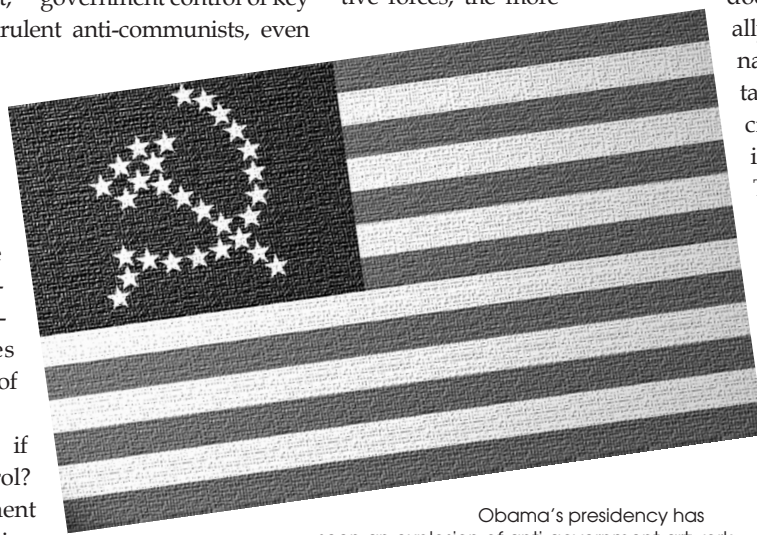
Even if Obama did support nationalization of all industry, though, the result would not be socialism, because the federal government is not sufficiently democratic. The representatives of the people are locked in place for two, four or six years rather than being subject to instant recall whenever the people wish. Representatives often receive substantial material rewards for occupying their positions of power rather than having wages no higher than those of the average worker. Perhaps most importantly, representatives are chosen from a small list of candidates nominated by party officials rather than being chosen from among the people themselves.

Nationalization would merely centralize power into the hands of a somewhat accountable government bureaucracy, creating a situation moderately better than the current centralization of power into the hands of unaccountable corporate bureaucracies; it would not establish workers' control of capital.

A common argument from the Right is that even if nationalization under the current government is not a sufficient condition for socialism, it is nevertheless an important step toward socialism. To support this, they point to the ten “planks” of “The Communist Manifesto,” which include, among other things, centralization of the instruments of production into the hands of the state.

However, this ignores the previous paragraph, which states that the “first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.” In other words, the workers' state must already be established in order for the ten “planks” to apply. Marx did not advocate centralization of capital into the hands of the current system of representative “democracy,” in which the government is a class above and separate from the people.

Barack Obama is no socialist. The ideals he holds are not socialist, and neither are the ideals people falsely claim he holds. Even the Right's wildest exaggerations of his intentions would not constitute socialism. However, the constant accusations of socialism have raised an interesting question. The president is not a socialist, but would it really be so terrible if he were?



Defining progress in a time of crisis

By Ben Wibking
STAFF WRITER

During times of high returns on the Dow, there is an oft-cited dogma of progress – a belief that the problems of society will be solved and are in the process of being solved – by advances in science and technology, as well as increases in economic output. Of course, now in this time of “crisis,” this canon of liberalism is suddenly forgotten. But such a time is exactly when this notion should be critically examined.

Perhaps this belief in progress stems from the increase in material wealth of the most highly-developed industrial societies. As a consequence of this increase, the standard of living of most people in certain parts of East Asia, the United States, and Western Europe is the highest in human history. From this prior “progress,” one may extrapolate to the present and into the future ever-increasing standards of living and material wealth. The “present” is a necessary qualifier in this case – at least in the United States – where virtually all measures of the standard of living have stagnated over the past thirty years, regardless of any effects of the current recession.

But it is also useful to consider another meaning of “progress.” Usually, “progress” could only be refuted on the narrow grounds that it is unsustainable or currently failing. A more penetrating critique of the notion would question whether there is any progress at all – that is, whether material “progress” qualifies as progress in any meaningful sense.

An alternate view of “progress” would question whether our society has become more humane, more tolerant, more just and more informed. Civil rights legislation nominally protects (some) minorities against discrimination, yet racism and sexism of all kinds remain widespread, if slightly hidden. Voting rights are now universal at adulthood, yet over 90 percent of people believe that the government is run by “a few big interests looking out for themselves.” While most areas have seen this limited sort of progress, little of it has been due to increased material wealth, and certainly

none of it has been due to projects of technocrats and intellectuals. That is not to say that intellectuals haven’t contributed. On the contrary, many saw the mass protests, sit-ins, “Freedom Rides,” and marches during the 1960s as an “excess of democracy” which needed to be contained so that “real democracy” could return to work.

A few courageous intellectuals have stood against the tide. Michael Albert, for example, who was expelled from MIT for encouraging similar “excesses of democracy,” has written extensively about a “participatory economy” whose function is not only material progress but also social progress, to be pursued such that neither is sought at the expense of the other. The critical point is that his scheme eschews elements that could lead to centralized and undemocratic control, instead replacing them with local and democratic control.

The corollary of this participatory economy is, of course, a participatory society. A program for a participatory society is not – nor could it be – a plan to improve society conceived or executed by an individual or a team of technocrats. Instead, it requires a very large team of ordinary people – an entire society – to confront its problems and solve them. The most important problems of a society, moreover, are not technical, even when they may seem to be. The problem with nuclear weapons is not that they exist but that their existence creates the very real probability of their accidental launch and detonation. Even climate change and energy only become technical problems when the social problem is denied. In such a way, social changes such as consumption habits, which could

lead to significant savings through conservation, are effectively eliminated from public discourse. There are technical solutions to some problems, of course. However, the most important problems of real progress are not technical in nature.

Viewing solutions to the world’s problems as mostly “technocratic” – that is, to be solved by an elite group of individuals, as implied by the doctrine of progress – is fundamentally misguided, because such people can only hope to solve technical problems, rather than social ones, and the most important problems of the world are social. An example is participatory economics, but the idea generalizes to the rest of society. Allowing a framework for participatory decision-making is the only just way to solve social problems – giving each, to paraphrase Michael Albert, influence on a decision in proportion to its effect on each.

As for technocrats or intellectuals specifically, what is required is a change in goals and a slight change in actions. The goal of a responsible intellectual should not be to effect social change per se but to increase the participation of society. What about government? Perhaps it stays in the hands of the same people, with the crucial difference that it is responsive to popular desires. Perhaps this is maximizing the democracy in the nominally-democratic society that currently exists. A participatory society is the culmination of an informed citizenry becoming active in its own problem-solving, socially and politically.

So where to start? I propose this: when one’s own interests are involved, attempt to control the outcome of a decision proportionate to its effect on oneself; in the case of others’ interests, to advocate on their behalf in proportion to the effect on them. But really, this is just a way of saying that with power comes responsibility. Use it wisely.

An alternate view of “progress” would question whether our society has become more humane, more tolerant, more just and more informed.

Become a part of Vanderbilt’s progressive voice.

Come to our staff meeting on September 24 at 6 p.m. in Buttrick 212.

E-mail vanderbiltorbis@gmail.com for details.

Greek Life puts philanthropy at forefront

By Steve Harrison
STAFF WRITER

For some Vanderbilt students, the mere mention of "Greek life" conjures up images of mopey pledges, matching apparel, and rowdy frat parties. Those interested in volunteerism usually look elsewhere to fulfill their service needs. However, these expectations tend to conflict with reality; Greek life at Vanderbilt provides a much more extensive outlet for service opportunities than one might think at first glance.

Within the Greek system, all different types of events are held to benefit various kinds of charities. Each chapter usually sponsors a particular charity and raises money through philanthropic events based around athletics, live entertainment, and other types of fun activities to garner interest. A key aspect of these events is that participation is not always limited to those in fraternities and sororities. In fact, unaffiliated students are greatly encouraged to support the causes.

One of the most recent Greek service events, Wild and Crazy Greeks, was a huge success. This Nickelodeon-style event generated a sizable turnout from Greeks and non-Greeks alike. Sponsored by the Sigma Chi fraternity and the

Throughout the year, the Greek community will sponsor many similar events. Some of these, like the Delta Gamma Anchor Splash to support the Tennessee School for the Blind, are held annually, but the philanthropy chairs of each chapter are perpetually creating other new service opportunities. Service chairs don't always have to be the masterminds behind events, as fraternity and sorority standards require that 65 percent of chapter members get involved with a campus-wide community service activity such as Dance Marathon.

Freshman rushes looking to get involved with Greek life are also required to participate in at least three hours of Greek service events. "The Greek community's contribution to philanthropy is commonly overlooked," said Dan Taylor, president of the Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity, "and the

focus is unfortunately placed on what many think of as the negative aspects of fraternities. Involving our rushes in community service shows them that we are not just a Friday night party, but that we actually give back to the community in a huge way." This prerequisite allows freshmen to get acclimated to consistently participating in service events throughout their years in the Greek community and provides them with a good opportunity to meet brothers and sisters.

Despite generally strong participation in compliance with Vanderbilt's standards, problems arise within the community service realm of Greek life. Every year, 75 percent of the members of each chapter

must have completed at least ten hours of service. Some members of fraternities and sororities tend to get into a habit of completing their hours early on in the year, which removes the incentive for

them to get involved later on in the year.

Another problem is that sororities and fraternities frontload the beginning of the Greek schedule with their philanthropic events because they want to complete their one required

community service project toward the beginning of the school year. This leads to a clustered Greek schedule that discourages some from participating in such projects because there may have been a similar event the day or weekend before.

To rectify these problems, the number of required hours for Greek members could be doled out over a semester, so that five hours would be required for the first semester and five hours for the second. This would ensure a continual participation by Greek members in service events, rather than a sporadic one.

The major problem of scheduling might best be solved by planning even further in advance. If each fraternity or sorority designates one day or weekend a year for their annual major philanthropic event, there would be less confusion and better awareness of the events.

Although there are some problems within the system, Greek life at Vanderbilt provides great, often overlooked, opportunities for community service. By working closely with the Office of Active Citizenship and Service, maintaining high standards, and encouraging a variety of different events, the Greek community commands a great deal of respect on the Vanderbilt philanthropic scene.

Editor's note: Orbis contacted the Office of Greek Life for comment, but they did not immediately respond.

Although there are some problems within the system, Greek life at Vanderbilt provides great, often overlooked, opportunities for community service.



Vanderbilt Greeks reach out to the local community.

Photo: Kappa Kappa Gamma website

Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority, the event raised money for the Families of Freedom Scholarship Fund benefiting the dependents of those killed in the attacks of Sept. 11.

Greek life detracts from the Commons experience

By David Yampolsky
STAFF WRITER

It's the second week of school at Vanderbilt, and I have just finished studying for my chemistry quiz. I am about to brush my teeth in the bathroom of my freshman dorm, when I walk in and see a friend leaning over the toilet throwing up. Was he nervous about a test like I was? Not at all. He just drank too much at Frat Row that night.

What was the purpose of the Commons experience? According to Dean Frank Wcislo, the Commons allows freshmen to "create a first-year experience that enriches the first of four transformative Vanderbilt years, where university undergraduates are encouraged to develop and contribute their intellectual, social, ethical, and personal talents to the fullest." I cannot agree more with Dean Wcislo after living at the Commons for almost a month, yet there is one factor in the Vanderbilt community that has ultimately contributed to the downfall of the Commons experience: frat row.

During the first week, freshmen were not permitted to go to the fraternity houses, or we would have to deal with the Office of Student Conduct. This "interim" period worked like a charm. There were no mounting pressures to drink alcohol and we were all meeting other freshmen through regular activities: meeting a new face at the Commons Center every second, forming study groups, and grabbing a late bite to eat with some girls who were just as lost around campus as us. Then September 4 arrived, and an entirely different subject of discussion was on many freshmen's minds: what was frat row going to be like?

I decided to take a stroll down Frat Row to understand what the hype was about. I am still am unable to answer that question. In fact, by the end of the night, I walked back to the Commons, horrified by what I had seen. The same students I befriended only days before were now drunk out of their minds, unable to realize how foolish they appeared.

What bewildered me even more was the eagerness displayed by the freshmen when hordes of them stood at the bar counters in the frat houses with their hands stretched out, begging the bartenders for a cup of beer. Yes, the lines at the frats were huge, and people were all too gung-ho about getting some of that depressant into their systems. I can assuredly state that the Commons experience has never been the same since that day, and it is essential to call this to the attention

of the Vanderbilt community.

The next day, I could not even count how many freshmen I saw walking around like drones, all overly exhausted or hung over from the previous night. At the same time, I began to hear an echo of the same phrase that has yet to die down. "Man, I got so trashed last night at Frat Row, and next thing I know, I wake up on the floor of this girl's room." This may not be the exact quote, but it summarizes all the variations I have heard since September 4.

If one is concerned about the prevalence of peer pressure at Vanderbilt, I believe the root of this problem is frat row. I sat in on some conversations in the Commons dining room or in someone else's room, listening to lively debates about who did more "cool" things when they went to a party. Soon, going to frat row only on the weekends became a thing of the past. Freshmen flocked over there on weeknights, with their academics paying the price in the end.

It's not just the problem of alcohol intake, but it's the mentality that has developed among a fair percentage of freshmen that you're missing out if you're bent over your books studying at night at the Peabody library, especially on a Friday or Saturday night. How can our class stay as united as Dean Wcislo dreamt it to be when such an attitude becomes more and more prevalent?

The founding principles of many fraternities were in fact legitimate. They began as social, professional and honorary groups that promoted community service, leadership and academic achievement. In theory, all of the fraternities at Vanderbilt should operate on this underlying philosophy. Yet when I asked many of the frater-

nity brothers at the IFC interest fair what they did besides having fun, few responded immediately with anything remotely close to community service.

I became more inquisitive and looked at Vanderbilt's Office of Student Conduct's policy on alcohol on campus on its website. I read statements such as, "The University prohibits the unlawful possession, use, or distribution of alco-

hol and illicit drugs by students, faculty, and staff, on its property, or as part of any University-sponsored activity," and "At no time may alcoholic beverages be provided (served, distributed, furnished) to persons under legal drinking age (twenty-one years old) for the state of Tennessee."

Of course, it is the freshmen themselves who make the decision to

bypass these rules and drink, so a significant part of the blame for abusing alcohol indisputably rests on them. However, the accessibility of alcohol at fraternity parties remains a problem because it enables these poor decisions.

It's important for students to leave their work behind sometimes and have fun. Yet, the concept of exclusivity associated with fraternity partying has begun to create a rift within the Commons. This is contradictory to the aim of the Commons experience. The social scene has become more divided, as the "born-again partiers" split away from the freshmen who find other ways to enjoy themselves.

While students themselves ultimately make the decision of how to spend a Friday night, it's in the best interest of the Vanderbilt community if the Greek system focused more on community service, leadership and academic achievement instead of its very visible party scene.



Pressure to experiment with alcohol may cause schoolwork to suffer.

Illustration: John Chen

How successful is the Commons experience?

Commons experience lacks follow-through

By Carol Chen

ISSUES EDITOR

As a sophomore, I have to say that the freshmen have it good. The minute I got on campus this year, I could feel the difference—no Move Crew was cheering my arrival and whisking my heavy things up the elevators. In fact, my dorm, Hemingway, does not have elevators at all. I missed the first floor meeting, and as we've had no subsequent ones, I still don't know half the people on my floor.

When I found out the summer before freshman year that I would be in "West House," I was absolutely thrilled. I imagined it would be like going to Hogwarts and we'd have house colors and mascots and hate the evil Slyth—I mean, East House—and all become best friends for life.

It wasn't quite like that, but I admit it was a great experience. My RA, the wonderfully talented and gregarious Madeline Myers, planned community service events, excursions, lectures, and even musical events for us. I ate Moroccan food in the apartment of the Head of House, Dr. Bacharowski. West House even had its own hand signal.

However, speaking as a sophomore, I think the biggest failure of the Commons Initiative is the dissipation of the community spirit and class cohesiveness after freshman year. A large difference between this year and last has been the sheer lack of anything resembling the inclusiveness of the Commons.

The class of 2012 seems to have shed the benefit of a year's worth of group bonding and become as apathetic to class pride as any other year. Ultimately, the shock of college was delayed a year.

One of the biggest problems of the Commons Initiative is the unnecessarily large gap between freshmen and upperclassmen. Segregating freshmen onto the Peabody campus does not shield them from the terror of starting at a new school and knowing no one.

There is substantial detriment to having no one to get advice from on the nitpicky things the guidebooks don't cover—like where can I get free printing? How does one get the most food on the meal plan? And oh, Lord, help, I'm dying of calculus!

All in all, my experience as part of the inaugural class of the Commons was excellent. I would simply like the administrative bureaucracy and the student body to be aware of the unexamined faults of the system, particularly the rough transition to a less cohesive upperclassman status where you no longer get showered with Commons love, special events, and house camaraderie.

Simply put, you are no longer that special.

Commons helps freshmen adjust

By Tian Song

STAFF WRITER

Move-in day. Hundreds of cars packed full of belongings stood in line waiting. As new waves of cars rolled up to the residence halls, upperclassmen cheered and clapped. Before anyone could say anything, Move Crew scrambled to unload cart-fulls of luggage.

Then came that awkward first moment: meeting the new roommate. Most became fast friends. Others started marking territories like hounds. After a busy day of unpacking, new students got to know the RAs and faculty heads of house. And before they knew it, the newcomers bid farewell to their parents and siblings. College life had officially started.

Vanderbilt created Visions groups to help smooth the transition from high school to college life for every freshman. Visions randomly grouped around twenty freshmen with pairs of students and faculty VUceptors. It brought together people from different schools that may have met otherwise. VUceptors guided the freshmen through the orientation week. Along with traditions such as the Founder's Walk and Honor Code signing, activities such as group dinners and VUlympics helped introduce the newcomers to the Vanderbilt environment. Although the whole experience was somewhat artificial, Visions served its purpose.

The center of the freshman experience is the Commons Center. Conveniently located right next to the freshman dorms, it helps ease the barrage of changes that came with college life. A dining center, a gym, and a mini-mart, plus a host of entertainment options are bound to please students.

The food at the Commons is generally delicious. A weekly menu rotation ensures that the freshmen are well-fed and satisfied. It will probably take quite a while for them to get tired of Commons food. When that happens, other dining such as Rand and Grins around campus add further variety to the diet.

Overall, the Commons experience has been wonderful. Visions and the Commons increase the cohesiveness of the class of 2013. The University's approach to freshman orientation, one that continues throughout the entire year, allows freshmen to gradually acquaint themselves with college life. Freshmen aren't expected to learn everything they need to know about the University in the first week of arriving on campus. After all, they have VUceptors, heads of house, and Visions groups to guide them.

Orbis Asks

How has the Commons changed the freshman experience?



Caroline Tricoli

*Sophomore,
Gillette alum*
"In the

Commons, you eat, study, and run into people. In Kissam, we don't even have a study lounge!"



Chibuzo Enyinnia

Junior
"The freshmen are more exposed.

When I was a freshman, I was exposed to activities and events and got first-hand experience."



Danielle Larsen

*Freshman,
Murray House*
"Most of my friends went to

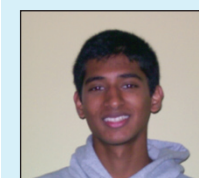
state school and don't live on campus, so they're not able to band as a community like we have."



Saira Shuhaini

*Freshman,
Gillette House*
"We're so far

away from Featheringill that my feet hurt getting there!"



Ajan Sivaramamoorthy

*Freshman,
Memorial House*

"I really know the people on my floor and I'm able to meet freshmen through the Commons. We're also able to meet upperclassmen through activities and class."

- Compiled by Carol Chen