

UT commission fights for equal employee benefits

Justin Joo
Staff Writer

It's been more than a week since the Commission for LGBT People posted an open letter to UT Chancellor Jimmy Cheek and Agriculture Chancellor Larry Arrington requesting a discussion on equal benefits for all unmarried domestic partners, but so far there has been no response.

"As of this time, we have received no communication from the university administration," said Keith Kirkland, chair of the Commission and main writer of the open letter.

The open letter was written to address Cheek and Arrington's response to a resolution from the Faculty Senate. The resolution, which was originally presented April 2, stated that the Faculty Senate supported equal benefits provided to all domestic partners of UT employees.

The resolution defined equal benefits to include, but not limited to health insurance, family leave benefits and education assistance for domestic partners and their dependent children.

The resolution concluded by requesting written responses from Cheek and Arrington " ... on the

Administration's plans for progress on benefit equality."

There was also an addendum that listed various benefits that the Top 25 universities provided to its employees' domestic partners.

On Sept. 7, Cheek and Arrington sent a three-paragraph response to Faculty Senate, which stated " ... it is incumbent upon us to act consistently with the public policy of our state. We believe that the three specific proposals for domestic partner benefit equality ... are inconsistent with the public policy of our state."

Kirkland said that he was "dumbfounded" by the response of the chancellors.

"How our leadership can reject the combined recommendation of the faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate bodies without any more substantive reasoning is beyond my comprehension," he said.

Kirkland said that after the response, the commission monitored various listservs and news outlets to see how the campus and the world were responding. After the University of Georgia's University Council approved a proposal to provide benefits to domestic partners, Kirkland began writing the open letter.

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“Following several email and phone exchanges, I released the final draft of the letter at about 12:30,” Kirkland said. “The letter was sent to our listservs, posted to our website and Facebook, copied to all of the deans, and individually sent to every vice chancellor, the president, and Chancellors Cheek and Arrington.”

The open letter (which can be seen in full at <http://lgbt.utk.edu/>) chastised the response and pondered how UT could have a drive to be a Top 25 university when it refused to consider benefit policies that are adopted by actual Top 25 universities.

While the UT administration hasn't given any response to the letter, public or otherwise, Kirkland said that there have been positive responses from other areas of campus.

“I was kind of expecting we might see some negative reaction,” he said, “but so far all of the direct contact I've seen has been from people asking how they can help and offering their support.”

“It's honestly been uplifting, in a way, after what felt like a total dismissal by our employer,” he added.

Some of that support could start coming from the Graduate Student Senate.

GSS president Amanda Sanford approves of the Faculty Senate Resolution. She expects GSS to consider some form of response to the resolution at their next meeting, although there is no official GSS policy at this time.

“I personally support the resolution passed by the Faculty Senate extending benefits to domestic partners,” Sanford said. “But I am not prepared at this time to declare my personal views to be those of the larger graduate student body.”

Sanford explained that graduate students are not defined as employees in the same way that faculty are, so graduate students are not considered to be employees of the state. Because state law affects state employees, Sanford thinks that difference could be a route to change the benefits policy for graduate students to include domestic partners.

“Whether there would be a difference in how the law applies to state and non-state employees is the question,” Sanford said. “It would hinge on the university's definition of “employee” and whether there is a difference in the applicability of policy. It is something that we are currently investigating.”

Sanford insisted that everything was still just speculation, and that nothing had officially been discussed amongst GSS and no actual GSS resolution was currently in the works.

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