

LGBT center questions ranking

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Staff Writer

The 2012 Princeton Review has ranked the University of Tennessee 16th in the most "LGBT-Unfriendly" campuses.

This ranking comes as both a surprise and a stark contrast to what the casual observer might have noticed Thursday afternoon, when the OUTreach LGBT and Ally Resource Center was having an open house meet and greet, and the LGBTQ-friendly Lambda Student Union was handing out brochures on Pedestrian

Walkway for the Student InVOLvement Fair.

Jesse Ford, resource center director at OUTreach, said the ranking was worth some, but not a lot, of concern.

"We haven't addressed it institutionally or anything like that," Ford said. "I think there may be a bit of ... unfriendliness compared to an inner city like San Francisco, but we do have a culture of acceptance, especially here on campus."

The Princeton Review, which is not affiliated with Princeton University, is a publication known for providing ACT/SAT tips, as well as helping incoming freshmen pick out a university based

on their ranking system.

The Review ranks universities in such categories as "Best College Library," "Best College Dorms" and "Birkenstock-Wearing, Tree-Hugging, Clove-Smoking Vegetarians."

To get their rankings, the Review conducted a student survey among those enrolled at the 377 "best" colleges that are discussed in the Review. More than 120,000 students were asked 80 questions about their college experiences regarding 62 categories, including LGBT friendliness.

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Tara Sripunvoraskul • The Daily Beacon

During the Hipster Hoedown sponsored by Lambda Student Union on Aug. 24, students voted on the best dressed hipster or redneck. UT was recently voted 16th in the most "LGBT-Unfriendly" campus by the 2012 Princeton Review.

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According to princetonreview.com, the Review's website, that ranking was determined by asking if "... students, faculty, and administrators at your college treat all persons equally regardless of their sexual orientations and gender identity/expression?"

Based on the scores given, the Review determined which schools were more or less friendly to the LGBTQ community and ranked them out of 20.

Given the perceived simplicity of how the Review determined the ranking of UT's LGBT unfriendliness, Ford was somewhat skeptical.

"Their criteria can be different than the actual environment on campus," Ford said. "We have a long way to go, but I don't think as a culture of students and faculty and staff that we're that LGBT unfriendly."

Ford was not the only one skeptical of the Review's findings. Caitlin Miller, senior in philosophy and Lambda Student Union president, believed that UT's low ranking could simply be due to surveyed students not being aware of the many programs that UT has to offer to the LGBTQ community.

"If you're not part of the community you may not be aware of the (LGBT) issues on campus," Miller said. "From what I know from the history of Lambda, we've come a long way."

But while Miller was dubious about the Review's assessment, especially considering that the Advocate recently ranked Knoxville the "8th Gayest City in America," as she pointed out, she still found it disconcerting and thought that it devalued some of Lambda's work at making UT feel more open to the LGBTQ community, especially with the incoming freshmen.

"Our hope is that freshmen will come out and see that the queer community is visible. We are proactive. We are wanting to make a difference. We don't want people to hear from high school that UT is a bad place to be if you're gay. There's actually a very welcoming community here if you seek that out."

And inside the OUTreach Center's open house, nearly 20 students were gathered, with many coming in and out throughout the afternoon, all seeming to be feeling happy and welcomed on campus.

Laura Poplawski, sophomore in plant sciences, remembered hearing about the OUTreach Center as a fresh-

man and was grateful that such a place existed, especially if she ever experienced any trouble.

"It was really comforting to know that there was a place that I could go and be myself and not be judged," Poplawski said. "If (a negative experience) ever happened, the first place I would go is here. And it's just really nice that there is an actual place for it."

"Having this really put out there and visible makes a more welcoming feel for those who identify as (LGBTQ)," Poplawski added.

Harley Prophitt, undecided freshman, shares Poplawski's sentiment.

Prophitt comes from a small town in Georgia called Senoia, where he says there was no acceptance of the LGBTQ community. Knowing that UT has university-supported organizations like OUTreach and Lambda not only confirms his choice of UT as his college, but it also gives him more optimism for the future.

"It gives me hope to see that the world isn't always the same," Prophitt said. "There are differences out there and there are people who support the LGBT community."

Prophitt plans to help out organizations like the OUTreach Center and Lambda in the future.