

UT loses by withholding benefits



The Fourth Branch

by
Eric Dixon

It's been almost two months since Chancellors Cheek and Arrington released an official statement concerning the university's denial of health, time-off, and education waiver benefits to the same-sex partners of UT faculty.

Much has ensued since September, and, with any luck, much more is on the horizon.

On behalf of UT's LGBT Commission, Keith Kirkland wrote an open letter to the chancellors, using "Top 25" lingo to deliver quite a case on behalf of the extension of benefits to same-sex couples. Since this initial spark, a coalition of students, staff, faculty and community members dedicated to seeing the chancellors' decision revisited has begun taking action regarding the issue. The "UT-Knoxville Domestic Partner Benefits Campaign" convened on a number of occasions throughout October, and has been fueling quite an awareness campaign over the past month. The United Campus Workers, Amnesty International at UTK, Lambda Student Union, and the Progressive Student Alliance have already signed on as official supporters. Hopefully this is just the beginning of a much longer list.

Real fuel to the fire came a few weeks ago when Chancellor Cheek gave an apology to the Faculty Senate, explaining that the letter was not meant to be dismissive. Cheek noted that the university would deliver another statement better outlining the university's position on the matter in a "couple of weeks." That was Oct. 22.

The evidence suggests that Chancellor Cheek is not taking lightly the blowback he and his administration are receiving. For this reason, the time is ripe to send a resounding message to the administration.

This is most important as a matter of equality, civil liberty, and, plainly, justice. But what's also important is something that I know must be on

the minds of Cheek and Arrington. The current policy makes UT a less competitive academic institution. If this university intends to attract the highest caliber faculty, then entrenching a potential barrier like the denial of benefits to same-sex couples is not going to achieve that goal. If I just earned my Ph.D from X Ivy League school and I have offers to teach at virtually any of the Top 25 public research institutions, a school that fulfills the stereotype of having a less-than-welcoming atmosphere for faculty is not going to be my first choice. And what if the instructor is gay? It's game over. UT is not going to be somewhere he or she will have any interest in teaching.

We bend over backwards in the recruiting process for athletes. We take absolutely every measure to be certain that recruits are as comfortable and included as humanly possible. Why don't we approach recruiting faculty with the same demeanor?

The Graduate Student Senate (GSS) of the SGA did not waste time looking into the matter and its potential effects for graduate assistants. It turns out that graduate teaching assistants are not employees of the state. They are considered employees of UT, which places them in a different category than faculty. With any luck, this is a blessing. GSS is currently looking into what it would require to begin extending equal same-sex benefits to graduate assistants. In addition to being a basic equation of inequality, this, too, makes our academic institution less competitive on the national front.

Students work very closely with faculty and graduate assistants, and thus, this is an issue that is extremely important to many volunteers. The resulting lack in academic competitiveness (not to mention the terrible national press) puts it on the table as an issue before students. Like many other SGAs, we'll hopefully see our SGA pass some sort of resolution in favor of extending same-sex benefits by the close of the semester. Students, inside SGA and out, need to be engaged in making this a priority for UT.

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