

Forum heald to discuss equal benefits for faculty domestic partners

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Staff Writer

The campaign for obtaining equal benefits for domestic partners among UT faculty continued Thursday night with the "Speak Out for Benefit Equality" forum.

A crowd of more than 50 filled into the small space of Hodges Library room 253. Faculty, staff, students and alumni shared and listened to stories and thoughts regarding the university currently not providing benefits to domestic partners.

Donna Braquet, coordinator at the OUTreach LGBT and Ally Resource Center and moderator for the forum, was pleased with the turnout.

"I was very encouraged," Braquet said. "I was glad to see so many new faces from the students. I also saw some faculty and staff that I haven't seen before."

A variety of anecdotes and opinions were shared at the forum. Everyone was displeased with the situation and found that it was a blemish on UT.

A common concern was that by not providing equal benefits, UT would not be able to obtain its goal of becoming a Top 25 public research university, stating that it is a contradiction to UT's effort toward diversity and could hinder new faculty and students from coming to a university that does not offer such benefits.

Jennifer Dobbins, senior in political science, was one student who voiced such an opinion. Dobbins herself was hesitant to come to UT when she was researching potential colleges and found that UT was ranked as one of the most LGBT-unfriendly universities in the country. She fears that other potential students will react the same way.

"I think that it makes UT less attractive," Dobbins said. "I have friends who are about to graduate high school who specifically do not want to come to UT because they do not think the environment will be very welcoming for anyone who (is openly gay)."

Dobbins is the vice-president of the Lambda Student Union and a member of Amnesty International, two student organizations that have given support for the Benefit Equality Campaign.

Nearly half of the crowd consisted of students. Several, like Dobbins, are involved with the student groups that were a part of the coalition, such as the Progressive Student Alliance and Lambda. A non-student organization, the United Campus Workers, was also present. Some came as individuals who just wanted to express solidarity.

Robert Naylor was one of those students there to show support. The sophomore in global studies is a member of the Student Allies of the Benefit Equality Campaign, which has been a major component in uniting the different student organizations into one focused effort to show student support for the campaign. Naylor himself made the Facebook page for the night's event.

"I feel like this is a really good chance to educate people," Naylor said. "Also to just let people vent, because there are plenty of people on campus who are affected by this who need to speak out. I'm glad there are a lot of people here to listen."

Student Allies has also written and delivered a letter to UT Chancellor Jimmy Cheek. Several other groups co-sponsored the letter, including Amnesty International, Lambda, the Harry Potter Alliance and All Campus Theater.

"We were concerned about the message being sent to the LGBT community and that the professors and faculty might be discouraged from coming to the university because of the denial of equal partner benefits," Naylor explained.

Naylor said that Student Allies is hoping to have a meeting with Cheek, but he has yet to respond to the letter.

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