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Through a Glass Darkly:

The State of the Campus from an LGBT Perspective

July 2008

While looking over the program at the Chancellor's Awards Banquet in April, a guest was overheard to comment, "LGBT – what's that?"

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is not an island. Rather, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, co-exists with other institutions of higher learning and operates within the larger social and political context of early 21st century America. To compete successfully for the highest quality faculty, students, staff and resources, the university must implement a vigorously inclusive policy of recruitment and retention. Any university – but especially a university that has labored under nearly four decades of litigation to overcome its legacy of segregation and racial discrimination – also has a moral obligation to lead its constituent members as well as the larger community to the fullest possible understanding and manifestation of diversity and inclusion. This report gauges the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's, achievement of those allied imperatives from the perspective of its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender faculty, students and staff.

Invisibility: the Foundational Problem

It is not news that there are LGBT faculty, students and staff at UTK. Or, rather, it **should not be** news. But for many members of the university community, the presence of LGBT folks is, at best, theoretical. It is as if many “see through a glass darkly,” which is to say, they see indistinctly – or not at all.

What has been done

To “shed some light upon the subject,” the commission during the past year has sponsored a regular film series focusing on LGBT-themed offerings, once-a-month “brown bag” seminars and created a commission web page filled with highly relevant and useful information and links about LGBT people, issues and concerns. With support from Ready for the World, the commission also was able to present a highly successful workshop and lecture by activist Suzanne Pharr, who addressed the related issues of racism, sexism and homophobia. It is impossible to calculate the positive impact of the commission’s three awards at the Chancellor’s Awards Banquet. Without doubt, that event had more direct contact with more people than any other single event during the year and the prominent feature of two LGBT commission award winners on the UTK home web page was a major step forward.

Needed next steps

In general, there must be a concerted effort to raise the consciousness of the entire UTK community to the presence of LGBT people, their perspective, sensibilities and concerns. Too often when discussing the topics of diversity and/or interculturalism, LGBT is left out of the discussion or included merely as a passing reference. Recently, a presentation by the UTK legal consultants on the post-Geier era contributed to this myopia by referencing enhanced military recruitment as an example of the benefits of diversity, failing to note that current law and policy do not allow open LGBT people from serving in the armed forces. This “oversight,” a direct function of invisibility, is unacceptable and demonstrates that even people of good will can be myopic.

Specifically, the campus should

- insure that there is full LGBT representation on every committee, council, unit or task force that touches upon issues or diversity. Full representation is, frankly put, more than one token representative. The current membership of the campus’s Council for Diversity and Interculturalism includes multiple members from racial and gender groups, but only one openly LGBT representative. This must be redressed in the coming year
- abandon the “stealth” tactic when dealing with LGBT issues. Not only does the “quiet approach” send a negative signal to LGBT people on campus, it is counterproductive to achieving the twin goals of an enhanced competitive profile and a fulfilling our commitment to justice

- claim and celebrate those positive steps already taken: establishment of the commission, inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in UTK personnel policies, and inclusion of domestic partners in TreCs membership opportunity
- support and expand infusion of LGBT content in all courses touching upon diversity and multiculturalism as well as new LGBT-specific courses
- develop and implement a mechanism to capture the demographic reality of LGBT presence on campus.

Status: The Manifestation of Invisibility

The lack of specific, documented data regarding the number of LGBT faculty, students and staff creates the illusion that there are no LGBT people within the university community. That illusion then subtly supports the exclusion of LGBT people from any benefits associated with employment at the university. In turn, the lack of benefits directly and adversely impacts the university's ability to compete effectively for the highest quality faculty, students and staff. Anecdotal evidence abundantly proves the loss of top choice candidates for faculty positions and it is likely that similar losses occur among potential students enrollments and staff hires. UTK lags behind peer and non-peer institutions in this regard, as a report from the commission's equity committee clearly shows (see the separate "Benefits Research Report" as well as the separate "Inclusive Language UT Forms" report). The anticipated extension of TreCs membership to non-married domestic partners is a welcome step; it appears small, however, when compared to other benefits easily accessible to the married spouses of UTK employees (e.g., health insurance). Among the more egregious examples of inequity is the lack of a bereavement / sick leave policy for LGBT employees who experience the death or serious illness of a partner.

To correct these inequities the campus should

- identify and use private funds for domestic partner benefits for the non-married
- review and revise campus specific, non-legal policies that discriminate against non-married but partnered employees (e.g., TreCs)
- consult with institutions of higher learning in other states that have or are in process of extending benefits to domestic partners (e.g., Kentucky, Texas).

Climate: The Reason for Invisibility

As noted above, invisibility of LGBT people at UTK is the foundational problem. It is fair, therefore, to inquire into the reasons for that invisibility. While it is true that the “coming out” process has as many variations and timelines as there are LGBT people, it is also certainly true that the environment (physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional) in which LGBT folks live and work significantly invites or discourages such openness. Indeed, unlike most other diverse populations, LGBT people are not readily identifiable by gender, race, or ethnicity. In short, LGBT people do not necessarily look different than “other” people. So, to be known as LGBT requires each individual person to make a conscious decision to be LGBT in the UTK environment. In other words, each encounter with another person on campus creates the opportunity / necessity to “come out” yet again. Whether those continuing encounters result in positive or negative outcomes depends greatly upon the campus climate. The positive steps taken by the UTK campus have been diminished by the “stealth” tactic which does not create the open and welcoming environment that would lead to greater LGBT visibility.

It is laudable that the recent strategic planning subcommittee on campus climate included LGBT concerns in its consideration. It is similarly laudable that the faculty senate mandated a task force to investigate and report upon the creation of a Safe Zones program at UTK (something that many peer and non-peer institutions have had for some time).

To follow-up on these positive steps, the campus should

- appoint a high level administration official to work with the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Organization (see <http://www.campusclimateindex.org/> and questions at <http://www.campusclimateindex.org/details/overall.aspx>)
- implement the recommendations of the Safe Zones Task Force, including the appointment of a full time coordinator
- identify funding and physical space for an LGBT Resource Center, akin to offices already established for cognate diverse groups
- work with the UT Alumni Association to create and maintain LGBT affinity groups

- officially sanction the use of



Conclusion: Bringing Light to Darkness

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has taken significant positive steps in the past two years to broaden its understanding of diversity by including LGBT faculty, students and staff. As noted throughout, many additional steps are needed in what will be a long-term process of full inclusion within the life of the university. Some suggested actions are more easily accomplished or have a shorter time frame for implementation than others. Nonetheless, nothing suggested above lies outside of the university's vision, mission and enlightened self-interest.

When everyone on the UTK campus is seen clearly as s/he is, then a question like, "LGBT – what's that?" will draw a knowing chuckle about days long since past. On that day the Torchbearer will have dispelled yet another shadow, and our campus will be the better.

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Submitted by the executive committee of the Commission for LGBT People:

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