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## University Speakers and Events

Office of the President

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## University Speakers and Events

Over the past year, the University has been facing questions and concerns over the use of student activity fees for speakers and events. Much of the discussion has centered on the 2013 Sex Week event at UT Knoxville that was planned by a student organization. Positive and negative comments about Sex Week have come from a broad range of our constituents including trustees, employees, students, elected officials, parents, donors, alumni and other University supporters. Students have organized a Sex Week event to take place again in March. University administrators and I have heard many concerns in recent days about the event and funding for it.

Bills have been proposed in the General Assembly to change the way student activity fees are distributed to organizations or eliminate our ability to do so altogether. All of this is concerning to me and my administration, and I believe it is necessary to inform faculty and staff about issues that could affect the University and its mission.

Controversy over speakers funded by student activity fees is not new. Forty years ago, there were similar concerns about student programming regarding the anti-Vietnam war movement, the women's movement, civil rights and the drug culture across our country. Today's topics are just as discordant. I believe free and open exchange at higher education institutions of views on controversial issues is appropriate, healthy, and routinely occurs on our campuses and others across the nation.

Upholding the First Amendment right for the free and open exchange of views and speech on our campuses is a tenet we must continue to support. The First Amendment requires the University to be viewpoint neutral with respect to student programs held on campus and with respect to programs funded by the student activity fee.

Going forward, I hope those responsible for planning speakers and events are sensitive as well as mindful of the diverse opinions of others as to what is or may not be offensive regarding presentations on our campuses. I have confidence that our campus leadership and our students, faculty and staff will take this to heart and suggest to our elected officials that it is the role of our Board of Trustees to address and monitor these issues with us on behalf of the University.

Thank you for everything you do for the University of Tennessee.

All the best,  
Joe

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