

Department of Sociology

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January **XX**, 2015

Chancellor Jimmy G. Cheek
Office of the Chancellor
University of Tennessee
527 Andy Holt Tower
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Dear Chancellor Cheek,

As the flagship university in the state of Tennessee, the University of Tennessee distinguishes itself in its commitment to higher learning, innovation, critical thinking, and global citizenry. UT, in particular, also seeks to set the highest standard for its students regarding ethics, equality, and human rights. It is within this higher learning mission and tradition, we as faculty strongly recommend that UT require all UT licensees that “sourced, produced or purchased collegiate apparel in Bangladesh as of January 1, 2013”¹ or anytime thereafter, to sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh.

Such a policy follows The Worker Rights Consortium’s recommendation for affiliated universities. Currently, twenty-four universities² across the United States have adopted such a policy, including seven that rank in the top twenty-five national universities, and four from the top twenty-five public universities. Because no university in the Southeastern Conference has adopted the Accord licensee policy yet, UT would emerge as a much-needed regional leader in setting the highest standard for collegiate apparel sourcing along with joining the ranks of prestigious and distinguished universities.

On April 24, 2013 over one thousand Bangladeshi apparel workers died while working in apparel factories in Rana Plaza. As devastating as this tragedy was, the global apparel industry, and Bangladesh specifically, has a long history of workplace safety concerns. Over 500 apparel workers had lost their lives in Bangladesh in over twenty factory incidents before the Rana Plaza collapse.³ With the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, however, opportunity rose out of tragedy. Leading apparel industry and labor experts have called the Accord “a groundbreaking labor-management contract.”⁴ As a legally binding contract between global brands/retailers and international unions, it prioritizes worker representation and brand responsibility in its governance structure and articles. Notably, it fills common regulatory gaps found in the existing social compliance model of apparel supply chain labor monitoring.

Noteworthy items of the Accord include:

- Independent inspections for all factory suppliers, including sub-contractors;
- Signatory companies are required to provide financial assistance for factory safety renovations;
- Signatory companies must commit to long-term, stable sourcing arrangements; and
- Supplier factories must provide extensive safety training.⁵

Over 150 Western brands have signed the Accord from twenty countries including over fifteen brands from the United States.

UT has already begun to show its commitment to ethical apparel sourcing with its decision to sell Alta Gracia made apparel in its VolShops in 2012. Alta Gracia is arguably the only apparel manufacturing company that pays a living wage, meets high occupational safety standards, and provides social protection guarantees to its Dominican Republic workers. However, Alta Gracia apparel is no longer being sold at VolShops.⁶ Adopting the policy that all licensees that source from Bangladesh sign the Accord and reinvigorating our engagement with Alta Gracia would accentuate our commitment to ethical sourcing and heighten our national reputation. It also would markedly demonstrate to our students and staff, as well as the wider community that at the University of Tennessee we take seriously our responsibility to *all* of our workers, whether they are directly or indirectly connected to the university, and that we hold ourselves, our students, and our partners to the highest ethical standards.

A faculty representative group would be happy to meet with you in person to discuss this in more detail.

Sincerely,

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Notes

¹ Worker Rights Consortium, “WRC Recommendation to Affiliates on Bangladesh”

² Specifically: Duke, Penn State, University of Washington, University of Pennsylvania, New York University, Temple, Cornell, Georgetown, Brown, Syracuse, University of Wisconsin, Columbia, Emerson, University of Michigan, Macalester College, Rutgers, American, Northwestern, University of Illinois, Washington State, George Washington, Michigan State, Grand Valley State, and Arizona State

³ Doug Miller, *Last Nightshift in Savar*.

⁴ Open letter to Professor Posner from Professor Richard Applebaum, et al.

⁵ Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh

⁶ Michelle Christian in Sociology is working with David Kent of the VolShop to bring the brand back for the re-opening of the University Center.