

President's Report to Faculty Senate
May 6, 2013

This report is the final one that I will make to this body. I wish to touch briefly on three important topics from this past year, because I believe these topics will be important in coming years, as well.

Benefit Equality

As instructed by the senate during the April meeting, I have written to Chancellor Cheek and Chancellor Arrington concerning their January letter on this topic. You have all seen the text prepared by the Benefits and Professional Development Committee, which I would summarize as: (1) thanking the chancellors for their response; (2) acknowledging the difficult political implications with such efforts; and (3) reaffirming the faculty's hope that some way will be found to bring "equality, fairness, and justice" to all the university's constituents.

I have promised to make the following announcement, on behalf of "The Benefit Equality Campaign," quoted from a message I received on April 11, 2013.

*The Benefit Equality Campaign is organizing to keep domestic partner benefits on the administrative table. Last year, the Faculty Senate took the lead in proposing that UT address the issue of equal benefits in order to chart a path towards equality for all workers. It was through this initial inquiry and the egregious administrative response that the Benefit Equality Campaign was formed. We are a coalition of staff, faculty, students and alumni who are working to win domestic partner benefits! Last semester we organized a community forum, speak out and painted the rock to symbolize our concern over the administrative response to the issue. This semester we've been strategizing to build back momentum and have started a video campaign to collect stories in support of domestic partner benefits. We are reaching out to the Faculty Senate for volunteers and hope you can lend your voice. The videos will be collected and turned into one video and shared publicly online. Many staff and alumni have stepped up, but we encourage faculty to speak up and out! We thank you for your continued support!**

**if you don't want to have your face or position posted online then we can film in a way that protects your identity.*

**please contact benefitequalityut@gmail.com*

Having kept that promise, I now wish to make an observation. This topic has been discussed, sometimes only briefly and other times at great length, during each senate meeting this year, but we are no closer to a change that we were this time last year. From my own conversations with Chancellor Cheek and Chancellor Arrington, I believe that they would have moved forward on this matter, if there was any possible way to do so within the legal restrictions that now exist. During our April meeting, it was suggested that progress on this issue would come only if change is seen first in the attitude of the members of the state legislature. Personally, I believe that was a very wise statement. As individual citizens of this state, perhaps we should consider extending our efforts in that direction?

Sex Week

On April 10th, I was contacted by a senator who stated she had been informed "***that units on campus had been told by administration and General Counsel that they cannot discuss sex week on the PERSONAL blogs and Facebook accounts.***" I shared the full text of that message with Chancellor Cheek, who in turn asked Margie Nichols to investigate. In a few hours, I was assured that this rumor was groundless. It is my hope that, with a like degree of openness, we will be able to address other concerns about Sex Week that have come to my attention.

Prior to the Chancellor's announcement of the decision to withdraw state tax and tuition dollars from funding Sex Week activities, some faculty members (who were much closer to this project than I) were under the impression that the administration was formulating a very different response to the various

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charges being promoted within certain elements of the media. The expected message about this student-sponsored programming would have focused on:

- the academic and cultural substance of the event
- the significance of an open and free exchange of ideas on a university campus
- the critical need to avoid even the appearance of censorship

However, the sudden withdrawal of academic support for the event by the Chancellor, after months of diligent fundraising efforts by the student sponsors for both academic and non-academic aspects of the event, send another message entirely. There was an appearance of yielding to pressure, from some political elements and a select group of parents and alumni, rather than standing on educational principles. There was an absence of public effort to correct the misrepresentations about this program made by some within the media and state government. Even more importantly, it seemed that the potential had introduced for a double standard, to the extent that speech on some subject matters is restricted while speech on other topics (that might be just as objectionable to different segments of the population inside and outside the university) faces no such restrictions. The general feeling expressed to me has been that, within the bounds of the law and university policy, our attitude towards protected speech should be subject-neutral.

A separate list of questions related to this topic has been posted for your consideration. I believe that frank discussions, with questions such as these as a basis, will help us understand what happened in this particular situation and why it happened. That understanding will be critical if we are to deal coherently with the next controversial situation that we face, whatever that topic may be.

President-Elect Elections

This year is the fourth consecutive year where we have extreme difficulty obtaining candidates (note the plural) to stand for the office of president-elect and the second year in a row when we have failed to meet the deadline within our bylaws concerning that election. In this regard, I offer these two reminders.

- The membership of the Committee on Nominations and Appointments “**shall consist of the chairs of each college, unit or division caucus and the Faculty Senate President-Elect.**” It is the responsibility of this committee as a whole (and not just the current President-Elect) “**to recruit two nominees for Faculty Senate President-Elect every year.**” (Article III. Section 2. F.)
- The members of each caucus are to “**elect a convening caucus chair by August 1 of each year.**” (Article II. Section 8)

In this regard, let me also strongly suggest that –

- As soon as the current elections are completed, each current caucus chair should hold the election for new caucus chair immediately, to be assured of meeting the August 1st deadline, and report the results of this election to David Golden.
- The new Committee on Nominations and Appointments begin early in the next academic year actively to recruit potential nominees for the position of President-Elect.
- The Senate and Executive Council promote service as a senate officer as a desirable opportunity.

Respectfully submitted,
Steve R. Thomas