

Jon Shefner

Address to UT System Board of Trustees, Nov. 2, 2018

Welcome and thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.

I've worked at UTK since 1999. I am the father of two successful UTK students, one graduated the other soon to do so. UTK has given me a wonderful career, and educated my children. I have a deep and abiding loyalty to and pride in this institution.

I've gone through the ranks, from an assistant professor to professor of sociology. I created the Global Studies Interdisciplinary Program, which at the time I left had the highest undergraduate enrollment of any IDP in the College of Arts and Sciences. After I left that program, I became department head of sociology, an office I've held for over 8 years. We've built a department nationally known for its growing excellence.

I am an internationally known expert in the areas of social movements, political sociology, Latin America, immigration, and research methodology. Since achieving tenure, I've published 8 books, and am working on my 9th. This is in addition to writing articles and book chapters, and winning external funding.

I introduce myself to you this way to tell you I am not unique in this institution. Scholars with the kind of career I've had, and the commitment I hold are quite common here. We are a university filled with experts. I am immensely proud to stand with them all.

I mention this also because I think there is substantial misunderstanding about the impact and meaning of tenure and promotion. Tenured professors do not sit home and watch Netflix. Instead, we are able to do more once tenured and promoted because we are better at our craft, and are able to explore new and innovative areas of research. I know Dr. Anderson and Dr. Lyons have engaged you at great length about the changes in the post-tenure reviews, but I thought it important that you hear another voice.

Knowing about the expertise of the faculty is enormously important for you to understand the caliber of those you work with, and what we stand for. We stand for excellence, and our mission is to lift up the state of Tennessee. Land grant universities were originally intended to drive economic growth and provide equal opportunity by providing expertise in agriculture, engineering, and science. The land grant universities of today recognize that many additional academic skills are necessary in order to address the needs of a changing state, nation, and globe. Again, the land grant mission is to lift up the communities and states that house those universities.

All of us at UTK take this mission very seriously. We hope you will do so as well, to recognize the gift that this university provides. But as you take on this deep responsibility to public service, please remember two crucial things. First, we are excellent stewards of the state's resources, and safekeepers of its children. Second, you have experts to help you as you explore your new work.

As stewards of state resources we use the new buildings, the labs, or the time that we devote to our work, carefully and well, and always with an eye to making our best contribution. You must recognize this, because there are those in state government who neither know it nor believe it.

We are not only experts in our fields, we are experts in higher education generally. Our expertise can help shepherd the institution we love, even though we have been systematically cut out from consultation with the focus act and other policies.

Your interactions with faculty can counteract some of the ways we have been disempowered and ignored during recent policy changes. Reaching out to us will provide you with the best knowledge and counsel about UTK that you can get.

But we are not the only experts here. We could not do the work we do without the excellent work of staff, whether they are in offices, labs, or our physical facilities. Here too, the expertise they possess is indispensable to the mission of educating students and lifting up the state. This expertise is part of the reason the whole campus opposed outsourcing facilities workers' jobs. It is not only that all workers deserve respect, dignity, and a living wage, although all of those are true. It is not just that you cannot build a great university on the backs of its most vulnerable workers, although that is true also. It is that the women and men who work in our offices, our labs, our buildings are experts. They make our work possible. They are every bit as committed as faculty are. They care as much about our students as we do. They are as much a part of the core mission of the university as faculty.

I am also a member of Faculty Senate, and a longtime member of United Campus Workers. These groups too are filled with experts, and good stewards of state resources. Both of those organizations also serve as representatives of university workers with deep commitment to the university.

I hope you take my words of welcome seriously. I also hope you recognize that you need our help in your new roles. We are good stewards and experts – let us help you help the state in your new roles as public servants.