

## Commission for LGBT People

### *Meeting Minutes*

April 1, 2019

Attendance: Tisha Benton, Joel Anderson, Mitsunori Misawa, Brandon Harris, Cody Harrison, Allison Heming, Bonnie Johnson, Tammy Renalds, Chris Shuping, Lizeth Zepeda, Mary Lucal, Jennifer Richter, Matthew Theriot, Megan Steed, Jeremy Gilbert, Nancy Thacker

- I. Welcome from co-chair Mitsunori Misawa
- II. Approval of Minutes
- III. Discussion with Tisha Benton, Vice Chancellor of Communications and Marketing
  - a. Tisha Benton thanked commissioners for inviting her to the meeting. She discussed the Office of Communication and Marketing's current priorities. They are seeking to understand the pulse of campus, specifically what faculty, staff, and students are experiencing day to day. She noted striving for more open communication. They have launched [belong.utk.edu](http://belong.utk.edu) and are working to add more content. The website will offer online resources for the UTK community, and they are collaborating with Tyvi Small to buffer the site. They also are looking to assess what is and is not available in terms of resources on campus. They hope their assessments will offer insight into what other resources may be needed. The goal is to be real about what is happening on campus, celebrating the successes and addressing challenging areas. Tisha Benton noted a goal to implement multiple types of communication to reach all audiences, with understanding that not all units function the same. She discussed working with multiple units to develop shared communication plans. The purpose of shared plans is to understand each unit's priorities and goals, and how the office of communication can support those goals. She noted this will allow for clearer understanding of who is doing what in terms of communicating proactively and in response to incidents. Shared plans will also distribute responsibility in terms of what the centralized communication staff needs to take lead on. She stated wanting to understand the Commission for LGBT People's needs and how the Office of Communication and Marketing can support those needs.
  - b. Questions from commissioners
    - i. Joel Anderson asked, can you elaborate on the Office of Communication and Marketing's strategic plan?
      1. Tisha Benton responded she has spoken with offices and colleges across campus to gather information that is informing a developing strategic plan. The Office of Communication and Marketing is currently looking to restructure their operations. She noted wanting the unit to be more agile in how they respond to incidents. Historically, the office tends to focus work on critical incidents as they occur, and other work can stagnate as all efforts go into those response. The goal is to be transparent and timely when incidents occur, while ensuring infrastructure is in place so that other work remains in motion. Tisa Benton also noted working with

communication folks across campus; her office is central, but there are offices across campus within individual units. The goal is to be well coordinated, to understand different goals across campus, and be clear about how the central office can support units across campus. She noted they are putting together specific communication plans for individual units; this includes working with calendars and assigning duties in line with upcoming events. She intends for the office to largely work on a campaign level, rather than responding to individual requests along the way. The goal there is trying to strategize, rather than get stuck in tactics.

- ii. Bonnie Johnson asked, can you say more about your partnership with the division of enrollment management? Bonnie noted there is currently not an option for students to identify gender/sexual orientation. She noted curiosity as to how the Office for Communication and Marketing might collaborate to begin gathering that information.
  1. Tisha Benton responded they are starting at the administrative level with a first session on Friday with enrollment management. The first step is to gather information about the division of enrollment management's goals. Tisha Benton noted uncertainty that they will get to those types of details in that first session, but they will have ongoing contact with them to revisit these issues.
- iii. Bonnie Johnson noted a lot of communication is about telling stories. However, she has noticed there are a lot of LGBTQ+ individuals doing work around LGBTQ+ issues, receiving national awards, but they are not highlighted across our communication outlets. Bonnie stated understanding why there is hesitancy, especially with negative stories and wanting to avoid negative feedback or repercussions, but what about the positive stories? She asked, do you see our communication changing, where we are highlighting more LGBTQ+ success, positive stories?
  1. Tisha Benton responded, positive stories are positive stories, and we want to tell them. Part of the struggle is not knowing about them. She discussed not having a sufficient process of gathering information in place. The process currently is largely relationship driven, where they hear about stories based on individuals who know others and share that information between interpersonal discussions. So, they are working to set up infrastructure to make information flow through a process-driven model, where information can more readily and reliably flow.
- iv. Joel Anderson asked, are the Commissions on your list of units to develop an individual strategic plan?
  1. Tisha Benton responded yes, and she has connected with Tyvi Small as a first step. They are working to discern if plans need to be created for each individual Commission, or if one plan for all groups will be best. She noted being open to either, just whatever works best for the groups.

- v. Allison Heming discussed methods of communication. She noted we do leave out positive things often, not fully telling both sides of the story, but we also are not providing a realistic picture of the negative things. How will the Office of Communication and Marketing work with the Dean of Students on bias reporting to gather a summation on what incidents look like? How might it be housed on belong.utk.edu?
  - 1. Tisha Benton responded they are in discussions with Dean Shea Kidd Houze. They have set up a meeting with the mattering and belonging group within that office to discuss this issue and ways to collaborate.
- vi. Mary Lucal discussed the Princeton Review Report, where UTK has remained on the least LGBT friendly list for years. It has become an annual topic of discussion and concern among this Commission. Mary Lucal stated the Office of Communication and Marketing should be aware of this. She asked if the office could help in how we respond to it, because it inevitably will come up and impact our community. Might we respond publicly or internally?
  - 1. Tisha Benton responded talking to Tyvi Small about the report. She noted a response is important, but understanding the experiences and holes in our current structure that leads to this ranking is also important. She discussed wanting to gather a better understanding of the lived experiences of those on campus, so we can start trying to make improvements to climate.
- vii. Bonnie Johnson discussed the Campus Pride Index, and its lack of update in recent years. She noted an update is needed. She also stated experiencing frustration after the Princeton Review Report was released, because no one came to the Pride center or Commission to discuss it's impact. No one asked about LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences or the impact of the report.
  - 1. Tisha Benton noted discussing the campus climate index with Tyvi Small as well. She also stated that feedback is important and will inform their efforts in the future.
  - 2. Allison Heming noted the silence in response to the Princeton Review Report is deafening. She noted when there is no report from our administration, it speaks volumes. Responding in any way is important. Even if there is speculation around how the reliability or validity of how the report is created or where information is coming from, it needs to be addressed.
- viii. Joel Anderson asked about Tisha Benton's thoughts or plans around what may come from current legislators' slate of hate. Regardless of what they do or how they intend to do it, history tells us they tie their agenda to LGBTQ+ groups on campus. How are we prepared to be reactive and/or proactive?
  - 1. Tisha Benton noted we tend to get more done behind the scenes. A lot of conversations between administrative leaders are taking place. She noted not knowing what legislators are going to do, but

there is no question that there are challenges. She is hopeful that there will be progress. She discussed creating pockets of greatness here at home where we can create them; creating welcoming atmospheres is something we want to do.

2. Joel Anderson noted asking the question because it feels like the impact from legislation is why responses around LGBTQ+ issues are not given at times—because we do not want to upset the system administration. Often students do not know or understand that, so it leads them to wonder why there is a lack of response and feel hung out to dry.

ix. Commissioners thanked Tisha Benton for coming and sharing plans.

#### IV. Reports from co-chairs and discussion

- a. Mitsunori Misawa discussed recent meeting with Tyvi Small. They are currently looking for new graduate assistant for the Commission. They also discussed the Commission's budget. Tyvi Small has sent a proposal to the Chancellor to retain and a working budget for the 2019-2020 academic year.
- b. Joel Anderson noted they also discussed the climate survey. The Office for Diversity and Engagement is interested in doing a climate survey on a larger scale, which will probably roll out next year. Joel also noted sharing our plans to conduct a climate survey specific to LGBTQ+ folks, to assess student experiences. He noted it may inform the more expansive inclusion survey they conduct next year.
- c. Joel Anderson discussed Tyvi Small submitted the funding proposal for the Qloset, and he was told we are not allowed to use state/university funds for personal items. Joel Anderson noted discussed with Tyvi Small how we can still fund this. He mentioned setting up an excellence fund and discussed details of what that may look like. Joel Anderson will check back in with Tyvi Small about this issue.
  - i. Bonnie Johnson asked if grants or scholarships could be an option? She discussed need to be cognizant of our role and how to word out intentions with funds as we set something up.
  - ii. Nancy Thacker noted some limits still apply to scholarships and grants when sourced through the University. An external source or endowment would give more flexibility in use of funds.
- d. Joel Anderson discussed Tyvi Small's ongoing work with the Commissions and support. He noted making changes to the bylaws in the next year to reflect our housing in the Office for Diversity and Engagement. We also may add a new committee for the mentorship program. He also noted the Office for Diversity and Engagement is currently a two-person office, and they are looking to expand.
  - i. Matthew Theriot noted the Office of Diversity and Engagement is engaging faculty fellows. This offers a way to use funds that do not require permanent salary dollars.
  - ii. Lizeth Zepeda discussed the intersections of identities. She inquired about how the Commissions can work across identities to support women of

color, queer people of color, etc. How might our efforts be more intersectional?

1. Joel Anderson noted some collaboration across co-chairs of all Commissions, and the CDI is purposed to be intersectional. However, issues do often become siloed within each group, and we want to be more collaborative moving forward.
- iii. Bonnie Johnson discussed all Commissions updating their bylaws to be more consistent. For the Commission for LGBT in particular, we may consider updating terms and structure of leadership, editing “LGBT” to “LGBTQ+”, and requirements for commissioners to attend meetings.
  1. Cody Harrison noted the membership and awards committee could play a bigger role in facilitating these changes. He also discussed difficulty making edits with the entire group, with challenges to get everyone in the same spot at the same time to review and vote. Electronic voting may remedy this. In regard to attendance, Cody Harrison noted the committee does cross check attendance records during review of applications for membership each year. Previous attendance plays a role in being nominated for membership.

#### V. Reports from other groups

- a. Equity and climate. Bonnie Johnson discussed the climate survey. She noted not wanting students to suffer from survey fatigue, considering the Office for Diversity and Engagement are planning to conduct a larger-scale inclusion survey. The Pride Center is also conducting a needs assessment. She noted the climate survey may be something to roll into the fall semester.
  - i. Joel Anderson noted they currently have around 30 questions, and he asked if we could instead have a small pilot study, which would be conducted this semester?
  - ii. Allison Heming agreed there is value an all-inclusive survey. However, she noted piloting our survey will give us an idea of how individuals may respond to our questions, which will be valuable.
  - iii. Bonnie Johnson suggested we gather pilot participants from individuals participating in Lavender Graduation. She noted these students are often who engage in LGBTQ+ issues and usually identify as LGBTQ+.
- b. Membership and awards. Cody Harrison discussed chair/co-chair nominations for 2019-2020. Currently, five people have indicated interest to serve. He will send out nominee bios and we may vote electronically before the May meeting.
- c. Lizeth Zepeda reported the Trans\* Rights and Resources Teach-In was a great success with over 50 people in attendance and 20 people participating in the teach-in. The Qloset was there, and people were able to get clothing. She noted a lot of community members also attended, and over 10 organizations came and tabled. Lizeth noted this is something the Commission should consider doing again. Shout out to Cal Lane for organizing such a great event!
- d. Allison Heming noted the equity and climate committee will connect with Student Life regarding the Campus Climate Index to gather necessary data. She noted the report typically comes out in May, but she will check for a deadline. The report

covers multiple areas: student housing, health, coursework, and general campus climate. Mary Lucal offered to help with the committee's efforts.

VI. Adjourn