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Dr. Jimmy Cheek, Chancellor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Susan Martin, Provost, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

FROM: Council for Diversity and Inclusion

DATE: October 12, 2015

SUBJECT: Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Tennessee

In light of recent events questioning the value of diversity and inclusion at the University of Tennessee, we are concerned regarding future support of these efforts. We would like to stress in the strongest terms possible, our belief in the value of diversity. Valuing diversity means that recognizing differences between people and acknowledging these differences are a valued asset. Valuing diversity means respecting individuality while promoting respect for others. Valuing diversity means emphasizing the contributions of the various groups that make up the population of the world. Valuing diversity means understanding the importance of people sharing their stories and learning from the stories of others. Valuing diversity is the right thing to do.

We are committed to creating a vibrant multicultural, multi-ethnic community where diverse students, faculty, and staff are recruited and retained and where diversity scholarship is respected. Our university seeks to develop graduates who can effectively work across differences and are prepared to live and work in a global society. The public sector values diversity and frequently turns to university resources for help in developing their own business model in this regard.

American colleges and universities have for many years emphasized creating a diverse student body because we believe that this results in a deeper educational experience. Preparing students to become lifelong learners who can navigate in and contribute to a global society after graduation should be a primary goal of education at UT. Diversity is an aspect of the world we should expect our students to explore, making it an asset they can use. We expect graduates to have completed a course of study that will enable them to see differences among people as a powerful tool for solving problems and seeking opportunities. We expect graduates to embrace diversity as a source of lifelong learning, personal fulfillment, and creative possibility. The University of Tennessee should be a place where the most dynamic, diverse, and profound learning environment can be found.

The funding for diversity and inclusion at the University of Tennessee is less than 2% of the total budget. Our funding level pales in comparison to the robust investment made by top 25 universities and even our own peer institutions. To be a recognized leader in equity, diversity, and inclusion endeavors, we cannot allow fear of change or difference be a divisive force. UT should be positioning itself to be a leader on diversity and inclusive excellence, rather than allowing discrimination to rule the day. It is always better to be on the right side of history.

We will continue to watch how events unfold surrounding this important issue. The national demographic is changing, making it even more crucial for higher education institutions to reflect this diversity. It is our fervent hope the university will stand in support of diversity and inclusion. It is the right thing to do, not only for the present, but also for future generations.