



The Society for the Study of Social Problems

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901 McClung Tower University of Tennessee Knoxville, TN 37996-0490
Phone: 865-689-1531 Fax: 865-689-1534 E-mail: sssp@utk.edu
www.sssp1.org

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March 15, 2016

Senator Dolores R. Gresham
301 6th Avenue North
Suite 308 War Memorial Bldg.
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Senator Gresham:

We are writing on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), one of the oldest and most respected social science organizations in the country, to urge the Tennessee's Legislature not to defund the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Since 1990 the SSSP has enjoyed a special relationship with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where our administrative office is located. The SSSP provides the Department of Sociology with departmental compensation and supports a graduate student, who in addition to receiving a substantial stipend, gains valuable experience working for a professional organization on a daily basis, providing services to its two-thousand members from the United States and abroad. We commend President Joe DiPietro and Chancellor Jimmy Cheek for expressing publicly their discontent with the amendment to cut funding for the Office, as we do the many other faculty and students, including students who staged a walkout during a basketball game, the editorial board of *The Daily Beacon*, and the Student Government Association for speaking out against these cuts.

We live in a society that has undergone dramatic demographic and other changes in the past fifty to seventy years. On occasions such as this, it is especially important to remind ourselves that it is our and UTK's responsibility to prepare students to work and live in a world that will require them to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to these changes. Recent events involving race, including a presidential election primary season that has witnessed numerous expressions of racial and religious intolerance, remind us that issues of diversity and inclusion still need to be addressed. When polls show that significant portions of our population believe that it should be illegal for individuals to practice Islam and an even larger segment of that population believes that practitioners of Islam, practiced by nearly three and half million Americans (a quarter of whom are African-American) and by roughly twenty-three per cent of the world's population, should be prohibited from entering the country, there is cause for concern and clearly underscores the need for offices such as the one. The message that this sends is troubling and could not come at a worse time.

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion on UTK's campus is doing laudable work, including the following activities and initiatives.

- The Collaborators for Change Diversity Summit
- The Trailblazer Series on UTK African American achievement
- The Gallery of Excellence and Reception that highlights diversity research
- Collaborations across campus with departments and offices to enhance diverse and inclusive spaces
- Oversight of the Office for Equity and Diversity, Multicultural Student Life, The Pride Center, the Commission for Blacks, the Commission for LGBT People, the Commission for Women, and the Council for Diversity and Interculturalism

These various entities have their own list of achievements and projects dedicated to meeting the many and varied needs of students, faculty, and staff. The Office is a vital component of university life. Without this funding, the ability of the University Tennessee to serve students from diverse, first-generation backgrounds and to prepare them and nontraditional students for careers in a world with such a diversity of people, cultures, and perspectives will be greatly diminished.

Recently members of the SSSP's Permanent Organization and Strategic Planning Committee (POSPC) and the Executive and Administrative Officers of the SSSP met with several university administrators at UTK to discuss the renewal of the partnership between the SSSP and UTK. While UTK is already a respected major research institution, it was clear from our conversations that UTK is working very hard to enter the ranks of the top twenty-five major research institutions in the country. We believe that it will succeed, but precisely for this reason we believe that this is an *especially* inopportune time for the University of Tennessee to be associated with this kind of an issue. The conversation should be about the quality of the university's faculty and students and the institution's research and other contributions to society, not the defunding of an office dedicated to preparing students for a diverse and rapidly changing world. We might add that it may also be perceived as an act of bad faith by the university to be defunding an Office on Diversity and Inclusion while it is a defendant in a federal Title IX lawsuit alleging deliberate indifference to sexual assaults by fostering "a hostile sexual environment and culture."

We support and add the Society's name and prestige to the concerted efforts being made to prevent the defunding of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. We should be encouraging, not hampering, efforts to understand and embrace diversity. If you wish to discuss any part of this letter or the issue of diversity more broadly with us, please feel free to contact Dr. Héctor L. Delgado, one of the signatories below and the Executive Officer of the Society, and he will be more than happy to have that conversation with you. This issue is of critical importance to the Society and its relationship with UTK.

Most sincerely,



David A. Smith, Ph.D., President
The Society for the Study of Social Problems



Héctor L. Delgado, Ph.D., Executive Officer
The Society for the Study of Social Problems

Cc: Dr. Joseph A. DiPietro, President
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