



The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

June 1, 2016

Dear Tennessee General Assembly Members and Governor Bill Haslam,

We are writing on behalf of the Governing Council of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), a scientific association with 3,000 members worldwide, including a number of members within the State of Tennessee who are faculty, staff, or students at the University of Tennessee, Vanderbilt University, East Tennessee State University, Austin Peay State University, and Rhodes College.

Members of our organization have been greatly distressed by the recent passage into law of Senate Bill 1912, which reallocates all funds in the budget of the Office for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for fiscal year 2016-17, and bans the university from spending state funds to carry out a number of programs organized by the Office for Diversity and Inclusion.

As social scientists who strive to apply data and evidence to society's social issues—including poverty, homelessness, prejudice, discrimination, and violence—we urge Tennessee lawmakers and leaders to reinstate funding for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Office for Diversity and Inclusion, and to increase funding for this office in future years.

Such action is strongly warranted:

The value of promoting diversity in higher education cannot be overstated. Scholarship by social scientists has confirmed the importance of diversity to the education of all students. Research shows that “students’ interpersonal interaction with peers is one of the most powerful educational resources in higher education” (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004). Research also shows that academic benefits flow from interaction with the “broader collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions held by” more diverse student bodies (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Learning suffers when diversity suffers. In the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, SPSSI President Dr. Kenneth Clark presented social science data as an expert witness for desegregation of public schools (Clark & Clark, 1947). Newer research tells us that when racial minority students experience social isolation and stigma, they also exhibit decreased academic performance and impaired emotional well-being (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Racial majority students also suffer, as the persistence of implicit bias in majority students is associated with discriminatory behavior and cognitive impairment. For example, when faced with interracial interaction, explicitly well-intentioned individuals often exert significant mental effort

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“in order to combat the expression of stereotypes and negative attitudes that are often activated automatically and unintentionally” (Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005).

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to develop graduates who can work effectively across differences. Leaders at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville understand how important diversity and inclusion are to developing graduates who are prepared to live and work in a global society. They also understand the importance of the university’s role in supporting the education of all students, including those who have faced historic barriers to access and inclusion, including racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities. For these reasons, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion is tasked with carrying out a range of programming that serve the needs of diverse and all students, from the Lunch and Learn Discussion Series, which focuses on everything from civility and religion to cyberbullying, to the Latino Mentoring Program, which provides mentees with personal support, assistance, social guidance, and positive campus and community survival skills.

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville serves a diverse state and must meet the needs of diverse students. According to the most recent statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, in the State of Tennessee, African Americans are 17% of the population, Asian Americans are almost 2% of the population, and Native Americans are almost half a percent of the population. Five percent of Tennesseans identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, and nearly 7% of Tennesseans speak a language other than English at home. Eleven percent of the 65 years-and-under population identifies as disabled (2015). According to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, Tennessee is home to 130,000 LGBT adults (2015). In Tennessee, as in other states, there are also many nontraditional students, including veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, first-generation students, and parents returning to school after a period of being away. Accordingly, the State of Tennessee and its flagship university have a vested interest in serving students from diverse backgrounds, and fostering engagement across diverse populations of students.

Issues of underrepresentation and discrimination persist at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. As described in greater detail in the March 18, 2016 open letter issued by faculty and staff of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a number of groups continue to be underrepresented on campus. For example, while African Americans comprise 17% of the Tennessee population, they comprise only 7% of the undergraduate student population, and while women comprise 50% of the population, they comprise only 35% of the faculty population. In addition, underrepresented students and faculty—including people of color, women, persons with disabilities, LGBT-identified, and religious minorities—continue to experience overt and subtle discrimination on campus. A recent federal lawsuit also illustrates the problem of sexual assaults on campus, which the National Sexual Violence Resource Center has shown to affect women and LGBT-identified people disproportionately (2015).

In summary, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) strongly urges Tennessee lawmakers and leaders to recognize the value of diversity to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and to reinstate and increase funding for the university’s Office for Diversity and Inclusion. The State of Tennessee and its flagship university serve a diverse constituency. State university institutions should protect and reflect that diversity.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,
Executive Committee, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

Alice Eagly, Ph.D.
Immediate Past President

Susan Clayton, Ph.D.
President

Chris Crandall, Ph.D.
President-Elect

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an interdisciplinary association of social scientists dedicated to the proposition that sound public policy should be based on sound behavioral science. Since SPSSI's founding in 1936, we have drawn on the expertise of 3,000 members worldwide whose empirical research spans a broad range of social issues, and we help policy makers apply that research to formulate effective social policy at local, state, national, and international levels.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Kim Case, Professor of Psychology at the University of Houston-Clear Lake assisted in preparation of this document. Dr. Case received her B.A. in Psychology from the **University of Tennessee, Knoxville**. The literature on diversity in higher education cited in this letter comes from a summary of the literature compiled by the American Psychological Association as part of its 2012 Amicus Brief on Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin.

cc: Dr. Joe DiPietro, President, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Jimmy Cheek, Chancellor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Faculty, Staff, and Students, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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