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Students, faculty step up fight for partner benefits

BENEFITS from 2

bers were generally opposed to the idea of providing benefits to unmarried partners, so they indefinitely tabled the bill, citing a position the Legislature took.

"They couldn't support the bill because the state Legislature doesn't support same-sex marriages," Adams said.

The committee has the jurisdiction to approve the proposal without state endorsement, but Adams said the members seemed set against it.

"Members have tried to bring up the proposal for discussion," Adams said. "But it's moot because no one wants to discuss it."

In an effort to revive the topic, members of the ASUN Sexual Orientation Advisory Council looked to unite people at UNL who supported domestic partner benefits.

Andy Schuerman, ASUN president at the time, said the council's actions were much needed because the support for domestic partner benefits was widespread but disjointed.

The committee gathered representatives from the Committee for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Concerns, the Human Rights Committee of the Academic Senate and various professors including Wolf.

"The work they did was astounding," Schuerman said. "They found a way to bring many supporters to the same table."

Out of the relationship between the groups, two important documents were spawned:

- An ASUN bill from the Sexual Orientation Advisory Council that formally showed the senate's support for domestic partner benefits and

- A new proposal from the Human Rights Committee of the Academic Senate, asking for domestic partner benefits solely for gay partners.

The ASUN bill originally was drafted to include just gay partners, but senators amended it to include heterosexual partners as well. The bill passed with a clear majority on Feb. 23.

The Human Rights Committee's bill was approved by the Academic Senate on April 4.

John Gaber, a member of the committee, said the new version should make it through the University-wide Benefits Committee.

"We've done our background on this topic, and we don't see how they can shoot it down again," he said.

Schuerman said the fact that the Human Rights Committee's bill focuses strictly on gay domestic partners and the ASUN bill supports domestic partner benefits regardless of sexual orientation is not a problem.

"The Academic Senate bill very clearly specifies gay couples because that's where the most severe instance of discrimination occurs," he said.

Joel Schafer, current ASUN president, said he will do everything in his power to help the bill pass through the benefits committee.

"I see it as an equity issue," he said. "I firmly believe that GLBT people should have equal status. To not have domestic partner benefits is really the wrong message to send."

Schuerman agreed and said the benefits committee has avoided its duties.

"Their explanation for not passing the bill was a cop out," he said. "The flagship university in the state must be on the cutting edge."

"I'm appalled that this kind of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is still legal."

Schafer echoed Schuerman's comments.

"This university should be a progressive institution," he said. "It should be steps ahead of society at large, but we're not that way."

Schafer said the Sexual Orientation Advisory Committee will continue to be active in the fight, but he did not specify how.

"Things are in the works," he said. "This is not an issue that will go away."

A serious problem facing the implementation of domestic partner benefits is finding support from all four universities that make up the NU system.

Students at the University of Nebraska Medical Center have shown

support, but their heavy class loads hinder them from being active about the topic, Schafer said.

The student presidents at both the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska at Kearney said the topic is not an issue at the UNO campus, Schafer said.

"We need to build university-wide support before we can make this happen," Schafer said.

Both Schafer and Schuerman said the best time to make a serious move to voice support for the benefits would be after the November elections for the NU Board of Regents.

"We feel like this is not the best time to pursue this issue," Schuerman said. "We don't want this to be the cornerstone of a conservative regent's agenda."

Schafer said most supporters of domestic partner benefits agree that it would be best if they waited to push the benefits committee to pass the bill.

"It would be wise to wait, so this

issue isn't used to show how conservative each candidate is," Schafer said. "We feel like the regents would be more willing to support this issue when they don't have to worry about a pending re-election."

Schafer was also instrumental in getting the university to look into making domestic partner benefits available to UNL students.

Natalie Hoover, a past ASUN senator, and Angela Clements, a current ASUN senator, also lent their support, Schafer said.

Schafer said UNL's new health care plan is an important building block toward domestic partner benefits.

"If domestic partner benefits are included in the health care package, it would be a positive precedent for achieving that same right for our faculty," Schafer said.

The topic of domestic partner benefits has reared its head on a national level, as well.

In mid-December, the Vermont

Supreme Court ruled that gay couples should be given the same benefits as married couples.

Tuesday, the Vermont State Legislature approved civil unions, a legal substitute for marriage. The governor of Vermont signed the bill into law on Wednesday.

Wolf said that support will only help the struggle for domestic partner benefits at UNL.

"It gives us something to point to," he said. "But in places like Nebraska, it's slow going. Political leaders don't seem to have the courage to speak out on what they know to be so."

But Wolf said the past year has been encouraging to him.

"It's been a surprise," he said. "In the past, it has largely been just members of the GLBT community fighting for this. But suddenly, all sorts of other people are joining in."

"Hopefully in 10 or 15 years, people will look back and wonder what all of this stir was about."

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