

Burlington – It might have been any committee meeting of any board for all the notice apparently taken of the 15 silent protesters standing behind the table. But it wasn't. It was the Diversity Committee of the University of Vermont's Board of Trustees, and the issue closest to the hearts of the placard-wearing Free to Be students – gender identity and expression – had mysteriously been removed from the committee's agenda.

When committee Chairman (and Republican former state senator) Tom Little called the meeting to order and invited a review of the agenda, all but one of the protesting students pulled out white cloths and tied them around their mouths, conveying their sense of having been silenced.

The students remained standing silently for all of the nearly two hours of the meeting. Their placards contained points on a timeline dating from five years ago: meetings held, promises made, studies and commissions activated, all to add four words to the "Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action Policy" of the University. Those four words are "gender identity and expression."

Also at issue for the students and supportive faculty and staff in the audience is a new draft of the policy issued by UVM President Dan Fogel. In part, the policy reads, "applicants and employees shall be treated in employment matters without regard to unlawful criteria, including race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation ..."

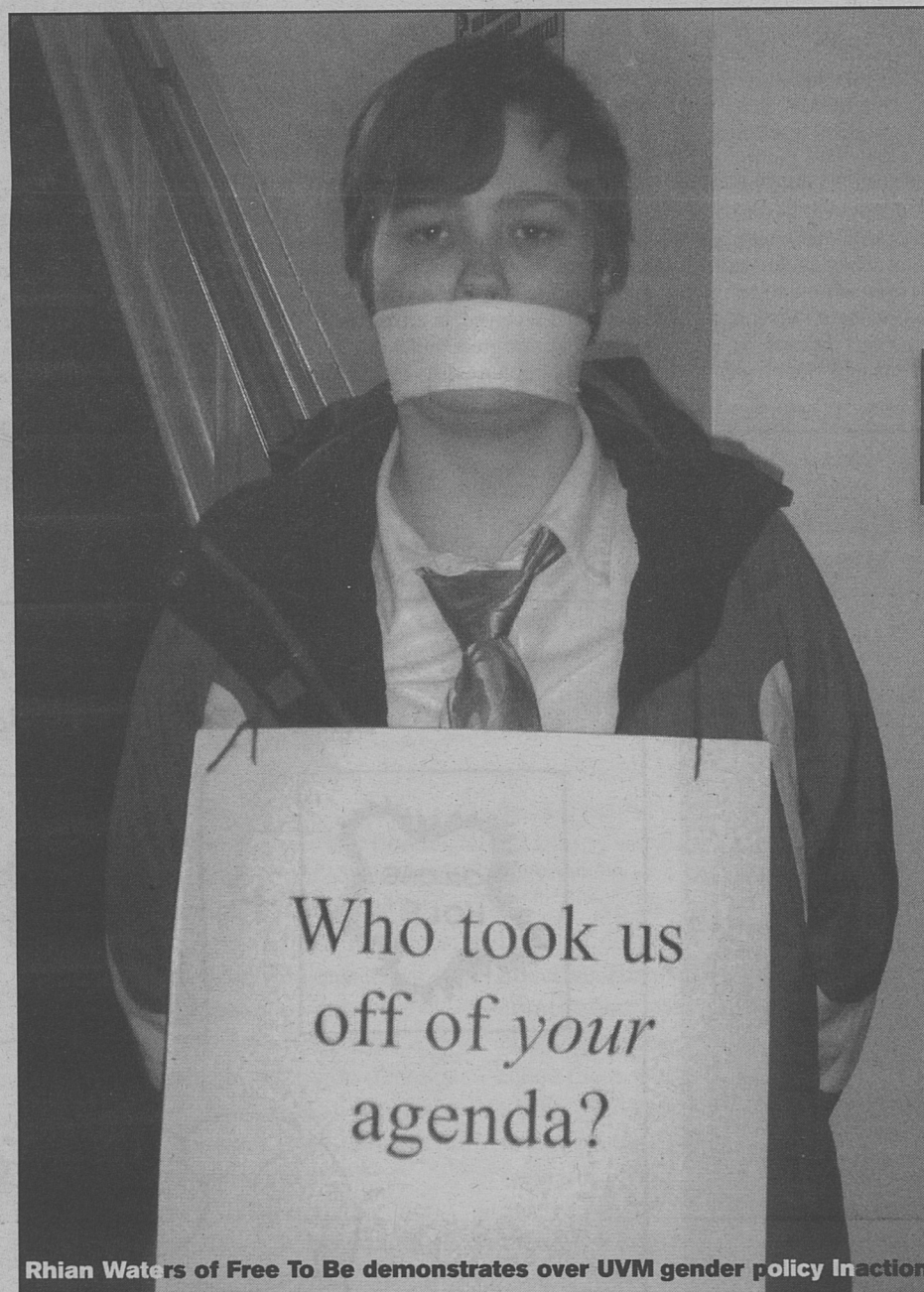
The administratively revised version clarifies the policy with a footnote after the word "sex": "The prohibition on sex discrimination shall be interpreted to include discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression, in a manner consistent with governing law."

At the end of the meeting, Chairman Little invited the students to "become voiced." Ethan Fechter-Leggett removed his gag, passed around informational handouts, and made a statement. "We have been silenced by the committee's failure to act," he said. "Ten months ago, the policy proposal was on the agenda, but there was no discussion. And today, we are off the agenda entirely."

Fechter-Leggett invited all of the committee members to attend the Translating Identity Conference on March 5. The conference provides basic informa-

Silenced Minority

Free-To-Be Makes Wordless Case for UVM Gender Policy by Euan Bear



Rhian Waters of Free To Be demonstrates over UVM gender policy inaction.

tion on gender and its permutations to attendees as well as legal and health information and support for transgender and transsexual individuals and their loved ones and allies.

Committee Vice Chair Senator Jim Leddy said he was "trying to understand" the need for a policy change, while offering himself as someone who is "well-intentioned but ignorant" on the issue. "Why is [gender identity] different from 'sex'?" he asked.

LGBTQAA Services staff member Eli Clare, a self-identified transman, responded from the audience. "The footnote is a good stepping stone and has an important impact on me personally and professionally," he began.

Clare addressed the "political and cultural paradigm shift" wherein concepts of sex and gender seem the same to non-transgender people: male equals man, female equals woman. "But for transpeople this relationship is very complicated. Some of us are female and men, others are male and women. For us these concepts are connected but not synonymous."

Little thanked the students for their dedication and courage in demonstrating their concerns. He denied that anyone had approached him to put the issue on the meeting agenda. Leddy said that the meeting had impressed him: "The message about not wanting to be treated as a footnote was a very powerful statement."

Dorothea Brauer, the director of the LGBTQAA Services Center at UVM, left at the end of the meeting frustrated with the committee's delaying tactics and what she characterized as "gatekeeper abuses of power."

"Students are here for four years," she fumed. "I know students who have graduated after spending hours and hours working on this issue, sometimes to the detriment of their academic careers. It's not fair to them for a committee to sit on its hands for a year."

"This is the Diversity Committee! It's the committee's job to prepare an issue for the board, not to delay it from the board," she added. "When Tom Little says no one has brought the [gender identity] issue forward, it's really that no one who trumps his authority has brought it forward. If that's where your politics are, you need not to be chairing a committee as important to marginalized people as this one." ▼