What is your role and area of focus here at Vanderbilt University?
My primary role at Vanderbilt is as the E. Bronson Ingram Professor of Economics. I am trained as a health economist and my research encompasses public policy evaluation and economic demography. I have two main strands of research: the causes and consequences of preventive and risky health behaviors (e.g., flu shots) and the socioeconomic and health outcomes of LGBTQI populations. I also direct the Program in Public Policy Studies and the Vanderbilt LGBT Policy Lab, a TIPS-supported initiative.

Who were the key people that influenced you and helped you on your journey?
My parents adopted me as a five-month-old baby from South Korea when they already had four kids in tow. Neither has a bachelor’s degree; my dad worked second shift in an auto factory all his life and my mom was an administrative assistant at an insurance company. They have always supported me. In high school, I had a teacher – Mr. Christopher – who taught three AP courses in a single year; we would come in on Saturdays for him to cover all the material (and he lived 45 minutes away from the school!). Finally, my husband has been amazingly supportive and has given up a lot for me to advance in my career over the 15 years we have been together. I have a lot to be thankful for and a lot to pay forward, which I try to do.

What do you want others to know about LGBTQI communities at Vanderbilt and beyond?
One thing I don’t think people know is that there is an unusually strong academic community related to LGBTQI issues at Vanderbilt. I have been consistently (and pleasantly) surprised at the number of scholars in different departments who have expertise in LGBTQI issues, in particular LGBTQI policy issues. Our Vanderbilt LGBT Policy Lab has external speakers come on a regular basis and all of these events can be found on our website: http://vanderbilt.w7118.

What does your sexual, gender identity and/or gender expression add to your role here at Vanderbilt?
In my adult life the path toward full marriage equality has been particularly salient: the Supreme Court decisions in Windsor (2013) and Obergefell (2015) in particular. I lived in California throughout the state’s first granting of same-sex marriage and then its revocation (Prop 8) and through all of the legal limbo. These experiences inform my research as I strive to create knowledge that accurately reflects the lived experiences of sexual minorities. I know what it’s like for public policies to directly affect health and well-being, the stress of not knowing if a partner will be recognized as such in various health care or other government settings, the extra resources spent on creative legal arrangements needed to fill holes where current laws do not cover. I know what it’s like to literally not know if I was technically married or not depending on what state I’m driving through. I think these experiences make me a better and more informed researcher. That said, there is a lot I don’t know – a lot of experiences I haven’t had (especially as a 6’3” cisgender man with a lot of privilege) – and I am always trying to learn and understand more.

What message do you have for the Vanderbilt community about serving and supporting LGBTQI people and communities?
I would encourage all members of the campus community to recognize that there are many members of the LGBTQI community here – especially students and staff – who may not have the ability to be out in all aspects of their life. When global, national, state and/or local events happen that may have disproportionate harmful effects on LGBTQI communities, as they regularly do, many folks are suffering in silence. We should all try to be better at respectfully reaching out and checking in with others during these times, and we should encourage our leaders to speak out in support of these communities.

What is a fun or interesting fact about you?
I am obsessed with tennis. I am not particularly good, but I am obsessed. When the Vanderbilt women’s team won the 2015 national championship, I may or may not have been watching every match on the live stream. And I may or may not have had tears in my eyes. Go ‘Dores!