

Business School Blues at North Carolina Central

Contributed by Chris Hess & Carlton Koonce -- Black College Wire
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Business school struggles to regain footing after a season of conflict

It's not exactly been smooth sailing at N.C. Central University's School of Business lately.

On Aug. 30, the dean of the school, Bijoy Sahoo, was abruptly replaced after a task force review recommended new leadership.

Sahoo could not be reached to interview for this story.

Sahoo, the NCCU assistant vice chancellor for strategic planning and continuous improvement, was brought into the School of Business in 2005, after then-dean of the school, Benjamin Newhouse, failed to apply for reaccreditation with the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs. Sahoo's position as dean was made permanent in 2006 and the school regained its accreditation with the ACBSP in the spring of that year.

After that promising start, the dean and some of the school's faculty fell out of sync.

In a draft of the minutes from the Aug. 30 faculty meeting at the school, attended by the provost, the chancellor, and 40 faculty members, Chancellor Charlie Nelms announced that Sahoo would be placed on administrative leave until January, and that Sundar Fleming would assume the role of interim dean.

"There has been a breakdown in the cooperation, communication, and collaboration in moving the business school forward," Nelms said, summarizing the findings of a School of Business review published last July.

"Collegiality … it is the responsibility of all of us. Petty behavior and grievances simply have to cease," Nelms said, according to the minutes.

Nelms also acknowledged Sahoo's "role in restoring the lost ACBSP accreditation" and stated that the "business school is a critical piece of this University."

External Review Findings

The assignment of the external review team was to "critically review the mission, direction, curriculum, organization and leadership of the School of Business at N.C. Central University," according to the report.

The team was chaired by Lenneal Henderson, an endowed chair of the political science department and the former interim provost, and six outside members from as far away as Wayne State University.

The team had 10 key recommendations for the School of Business.

Some of the more important recommendations were to appoint a new dean to help promote a better culture of cooperation, excellence and performance.

The team observed low faculty morale, cooperation and collaboration, a loss of confidence in the current dean and insufficient progress toward reaccreditation with a second accrediting association.

They described the new leadership in the office of the dean as an imperative.

The team observed that some faculty and staff had reported conflict and stress and said that they are even fearful of coming to work or find the environment to be hostile and tense.

According to the team, "conflict [is] draining the creative, pedagogical and administrative energies of the School of Business."

Cameron Seay

One of the most vocal critics of the business school has been Cameron Seay, an African-American assistant professor in computer information systems, who came to the business school in 2005 on a tenure line position.

According to Courtney Ferguson, a faculty member whose grievances with Sahoo are described below, Seay was the one who "badgered Sahoo the most."

In a March 2010 memo to the provost, Sahoo recounts that he initially, in 2008, stood by Seay even after a promotions committee recommended against his reappointment.

He stated that he did so "with sincere hope and expectation that the additional time and counseling would help him become a more productive scholar and rectify personal behavior and conduct."

In that same memo he explains his reasons for not recommending Seay to a second 3-year appointment stating that the promotions committee was split 4-4 on Seay's reappointment and that the improved behavior that he had hoped for did not materialize.

"The four 'yes' votes all came from African-Americans," according to Seay.

In his memo, Sahoo described his decision regarding Seay as follows: "He negatively impacts the performance and the morale of his faculty colleagues by demeaning their worth. He has been reprimanded for shouting, for using abusive language, and for insulting members of staff and his faculty colleagues."

According to the memo, Seay has called colleagues "liars and cowards," called a female faculty member "sweetie," and another "Bull Connor."

Conner, a symbol of white bigotry, was the public safety commissioner of Selma, Ala. who used water hoses and police dogs on black protesters during the civil rights movement.

By November 2009, Seay had been placed on administrative leave by Chancellor Nelms who wrote the following to Seay: "I want to state unequivocally that incivility and lack of respect are inconsistent with the values of NCCU and will not be tolerated."

A little over a month and a half later, Seay inquired about how to file an Equal Employment Opportunity complaint against Sahoo and the School of Business in a Jan. 3, 2010 e-mail.

In the e-mail to Andria Knight, NCCU's former EEO director, claimed that there was "blatant retaliation against me for engaging in Constitutionally-protected speech."

By April 30, 2010, Nelms decided that he had to go beyond administrative leave. He fired Seay, stating that he was to "remain off-campus" and "not have any contact with departmental faculty, staff and/or students."

In that memo, Nelms described Seay's conduct as making him "unfit to continue as a member of the NCCU faculty" and says that Seay has created "an atmosphere of fear, threat, and intimidation."

Seay denies creating such an environment and paints a different picture.

In e-mails to Knight, he describes a "level of injustice in the School of Business [that] has reached sickening levels," and says that Sahoo "has a history of engaging in personnel actions to remove African American, people of color, and female faculty from the School of Business."

Without Cause?

In March 20 and April 19 e-mails to Knight and the Campus Echo, Seay claims that numerous African-American male and female faculty, plus one Asian female, were either not hired or not reappointed by Sahoo "without cause."

He listed the following professors: Fay Cobb-Payton, Pam Carter, Courtney Ferguson, Joyce McGriff, Berkita Bradford, Ed Irving, Salih Hakeem, and Hosne Mridha.

Salih Hakeem told the Campus Echo that he had been denied reappointment which he appealed, and is now back on the faculty after a process that took about three years.

According to Seay, Hosne Mridha also won an appeal and is now back with the school of business.

The case of Courtney Ferguson stands out.

Ferguson, a professor who had been with the University since 1969, was diagnosed with uterine cancer in 2006.

According to Ferguson, she requested sick leave in January 2007, but "felt pressure to retire … Dr. Sahoo did not want to give me the semester off."

Ferguson described Sahoo as having a "misunderstanding about how to handle personnel."

According to Seay, he had been told by Sahoo to inform Ferguson that she would be taken off the payroll if she did not return to work, even though she was being treated for a life-threatening illness. "I refused to do so," said Seay.

According to Ferguson she appealed the suggested retirement.

"But because I was so sick I didn't have the emotional or physical strength to fight it." She is now represented by an attorney.

After getting nowhere with an appeal to the University's faculty tenure committee with claims that the decision to fire him was based on "retaliation" and was "made in a racially discriminatory manner," Seay then turned to the EEO Commission and filed a formal complaint with the same accusations on Aug. 17, 2010.

Seay's Earlier Suit

But this is not the first time Seay has made claims of racial discrimination.

In 1997 Seay filed a similar complaint against the U.S. Department of Transportation where he worked with the Federal Railroad Administration as a computer specialist.

"The management of the Agency in the field is totally white and I believe that I have been denied promotion and subjected to less favorable job assignments," states his affidavit in that case.

In the affidavit Seay admits to using vulgar language with his supervisor and during a meeting about tuition reimbursement.

"While I may have used some vulgar and explicit language in that meeting, this was undertaken to vent my anger," says Seay in the affidavit.

The attorney representing Seay in that case, Adam Conti, explained the outcome to the Campus Echo like this: "We totally lost that case."

Fleming at the Helm

It's now up to interim dean Sundar Fleming to pick up the pieces.

Fleming, who served as dean of the School of Business for 1987 to 1999, certainly knows the terrain.

"Hopefully we will be moving in the right direction," he said. "I think the morale of the school is good."

Seay is now continuing his teaching career at N.C. A&T University and waiting for the outcome of his latest discrimination charge.

Chris Hess and Carlton Koonce writes for The Campus Echo, the N.C. Central University student newspaper, which originally published this article.{moshaloscan}