



Vern Hockney/Staff writer

Michael Griffin speaks to students Feb. 27 outside the AASA office as he attempts to remove his belongings. Three students stand in the doorway of the office, refusing to allow Griffin to remove his belongings until the university recognizes a, "History of disrespect towards the black faculty." Griffin left relatively empty handed.

Allegations abound

Administration remains quiet about AASA terminations

Vern Hockney

Staff writer

In the middle of Black History Month, two prolific African-American personnel were released from the Office of African American Student Affairs and have appealed the decision made by Northern Kentucky University administration.

Northern Kentucky University terminated Blanche Pringle-Smith and Michael Griffin on Feb. 3 and Feb. 17, respectively. NKU officials refused to comment on specifics of the terminations, except to say that it was a personnel matter and were not at liberty to discuss it.

Word of the terminations reached students quickly and

they held a forum to discuss allegedly unethical issues NKU may have followed during the terminations.

At the forum held in the Otto M. Budig Theater, students asked Vice President of Student Affairs Zebulun Davenport, and Miya Simpson, coordinator of AASA, why Pringle-Smith and Griffin were fired. Neither would comment further than to tell students that this was a "personnel matter" and that they were not at liberty to discuss the issues.

Miya Simpson did not return repeated calls and e-mails to respond to this story.

Why Aren't They Here?

On Feb. 3 NKU terminated Pringle-Smith's services for "ongoing demonstrations of unwillingness to work cooperatively with new leadership," according to her termination form—signed by Simpson and Dean of Students Jeffrey Waple.

NKU also terminated Griffin's services to the university for similarly vague reasons on Feb. 17. According to Griffin, his termination form simply said that he was terminated due to "unwillingness to perform assigned duties."

Two days before Pringle-Smith's termination and Griffin's

suspension, Waple called an "emergency meeting" of the staff in the AASA to discuss concerns that they had, according to e-mail records.

Waple would not elaborate on what was discussed at the meeting except that "It was a meeting of the staff with me, and (the AASA staff) had to get an understanding of some of the things that were going on in the office."

Pringle-Smith refutes allegations that she was unwilling to work with new leadership.

"I was not given any specific instances where I demonstrated a lack of cooperation with the new leadership," Pringle-Smith said.

Pringle-Smith believes she was terminated, rather, for voicing concerns about the direction the office was heading.

"Since the departure of Cynthia Pinchback-Hines (former director of AASA)," Pringle-Smith said, "Michael Griffin and I voiced our concerns for the direction of the office and Student Affairs Division. We were very concerned about the lack of commitment for institutionalizing diversity, need for sufficient departmental funds...student loan burdens and deplorable retention rates."

E-mails indicate that Pringle-Smith may have indeed been making a good faith ef-

fort to work with the new administration.

In an e-mail dated Jan. 14 to Lori Southwood, senior director of Human Resources, Pringle-Smith stated: "I am attempting to employ some of the strategies you suggested to help facilitate a smooth transition to the new director's tenure. I have tried to take a consultant's view of the situation and have attempted to defuse the situation by providing information to the director, and completing the sudden barrage of assignments prior to the deadlines requested."

Pringle-Smith continues in the e-mail to state that since her meeting with HR on Jan. 5 the "director's demeanor towards me has become increasingly hostile and tense. Yesterday in a staff meeting, I was verbally intimidated by the director's remarks." This led Pringle-Smith to believe that she may have also been terminated in retaliation for talking to HR about her concerns.

Pringle-Smith said in the forum on Feb. 17 that she was not afforded due process nor any opportunity to rebut her termination.

She named Simpson, Waple and Davenport as the main administrators involved in her termination.

Griffin shared similar views as to his termination and said that, "the Division of Student Affairs administration wanted to 'clean house' and bring in individuals who will be complicit in not addressing the growth edges of Northern Kentucky University. In sum, they want less talented and experienced individuals who are not as progressive and will not actively address issues of power, privilege, oppression, racism, classism, sexism, etc..."

Griffin, too, became concerned that his job might have been in jeopardy after the "forced resignation" of former AASA Associate Dean Pinchback-Hines.

Griffin addressed students who rallied to support him as he gathered his belongings from university grounds on Feb. 27: "They fired Cynthia Hines also, if y'all didn't know that...did y'all notice that y'all came back from break and she wasn't here? She just wasn't here...and what that says to

y'all, in a way, is 'damn she just up and left us.' No she didn't just up and leave y'all. She had to go—Doin too much."

Griffin also named Simpson, Waple and Davenport as the administrators that terminated him.

When asked if he was afforded the opportunity to rebut his termination, he told *The Northerner*, "For fear of retaliation by the NKU administration and legal reasons, all I can say is that I fought for the opportunity to continue to work for the NKU community."

The Northerner obtained e-mails that imply Griffin was willing to work with Simpson to move the AASA forward.

"As stated in my meeting on Feb. 8, 2010, I am willing to work with Dr. Simpson to support and develop students at Northern Kentucky University," Griffin said in an e-mail correspondence with Waple dated Feb. 12. When the university reopened on Feb. 17, Griffin was terminated.

The Larger Issue

The larger issue at hand for many students is whether or not Griffin and Pringle-Smith were afforded due process prior to their termination.

Waple, however, said that the proper process was afforded to Griffin and Pringle-Smith.

"Yes, we did follow proper University procedures," Waple said.

Neither Southwood nor Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel Sara Sidebottom would comment on whether the university followed procedure.

The NKU employee discipline Web site states an employee will receive a verbal reprimand, written reprimand or suspension, or dismissal, based on the severity of the situation, before being fired. The only time an employee can be fired right away is for an inefficiency, misconduct, reduction of force, selection process, short-term reduction of force or permanent reduction of force.

Waple said he was unsure whether there would be legal consequences as a result of these terminations, but said that he was not worried about



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Pringle-Smith displays her termination form at Feb. 17 forum.

it.

"I hope not, but I don't sit up at night and worry about it. I have ten departments and all the students they impact (to worry about)," Waple said.

Griffin and Pringle-Smith said that they have filed grievances concerning their termination—however they could not discuss specifics about their grievances.

Accomplishments

Pringle-Smith and Griffin had been associated with the AASA for about 18 months at the time of their terminations. During that time they implemented many initiatives and growth in the AASA. One main concern was that Pringle-Smith and Griffin had when they came to the office was African-American retention rates at the university.

During their time in the AASA Pringle-Smith and Griffin designed and imple-

mented new programs, revamped old programs to better serve students and fought for students rights within the university—helping students deal with such issues as financial aid, classes, leadership and life.

Why Were They Here

Pringle-Smith has served in higher education for more than 15 years. She hoped that retention programs she instituted in other institutions could be replicated at NKU, specifically to help retain underrepresented groups.

"Prior to arriving at NKU," Pringle-Smith said, "I acted as the director of similar diversity initiatives and coordinated comprehensive support service programs at private schools...We achieved 80 percent to 90 percent retention rates of underrepresented students at those institutions which I believed could be

replicated through the NKU ROCKS program at NKU."

Pringle-Smith also said: "I liked the fact that NKU had a specific office devoted to the success of African-American students. Many institutions have integrated such offices into one multicultural affairs department or have alleviated them all together. With the right leadership, I believed OAASA could have a tremendous impact on NKU's diversity and retention missions."

Griffin, too, saw the AASA as an opportunity to make a difference in the NKU community.

"I saw the opportunity to work in the Office of African American Student Affairs as one to make a substantial contribution to the Northern Kentucky University community," Griffin said. "Empowering/developing students and

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social justice is my passion. The opportunity to work with NKU students, faculty, and staff fueled and affirmed that passion.”

How is AASA Functioning with Two Missing Staff Members?

The loss of two key members of the AASA has left the office scrambling.

One concern is making sure that the office’s and university’s goal of increasing retention rates of African-American students will still be worked on—a job which Waple says Griffin and Pringle-Smith were major contributors.

“There is no doubt,” Waple said, “that the work they were doing contributed to some of the increase in Afri-

can-American student retention.”

Waple said that it is unlikely anyone will be placed in their jobs before the end of the semester. It is the administration’s goal to have individuals named to fill those positions by then.

Waple said the office hopes to have the job descriptions finished in March and to have candidates visit in April. Waple assured that students will be involved in discussing the future duties of any replacement employees. But the new employees would not start their work until June or July.

The job descriptions for both positions are being reworked and are part of the delay according to Waple and Southwood.

“It is our intention to fill

both positions. Will they look the same? They may or may not look exactly the same,” Waple said.

A staff member from housing, Destiny Harper, has been assigned to assist the office during the transition and will be working with the NKU ROCKS program for student retention. In addition, Simpson will take on most of Griffin’s prior responsibilities—which includes all programming for the semester.

“There’s going to be an impact. We hope that we’re not cancelling programming service,” Waple said. “We might not have the right information. We might have to delay some of the programming.”

What Should Students Learn from This

Pringle-Smith and Griffin believe that this is not just about them anymore—this is about something bigger.

Griffin addressed students gathered in front of his former office on Feb. 27: “This is the moment of truth. What are you gonna do? To be honest, at this point it’s not about Blanche (Pringle-Smith) and Michael Griffin. People come and go. The problem here is—this is broke.”

He cautioned students to avoid being used as “cannon-fodder” for personal and professional goals.

“The black student population, to be even more (precise) the white student population, at Northern Kentucky University is being used as cannon fodder and collateral damage for folks to move in their professional careers.”

Pringle-Smith said she hoped students would take away from this situation: “Always do the right thing, because your integrity and reputation are all you have to stand on. Never be afraid to stand up when it is your turn to represent your principles. Constantly being aware of your political landscape, because even doing an exemplary job does not assure that you will not be attacked by disingenuous individuals only dedicated to their own enlightened self interest.”

Griffin agreed and said, “I want students, faculty and staff to take away, no matter how effective you are, you will be a target based on that effectiveness. I shared with NKU students often the statement ‘to be truly committed is to be endangered.’”

Jesse Call contributed to this article.

SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE BEACH FOR SPRING BREAK. OTHERS GO TO SOUP KITCHENS.

Some wear flip-flops; others wear work boots. Some make fools of themselves; others make a difference.

Take, for example, the folks in NKU’s Baptist Campus Ministry. For the past few years, dozens of NKU students have spent their Spring Break traveling with the BCM to various locales to help those in need. This year about 70 students will visit both urban and rural sites throughout Kentucky to lend a hand with construction projects and distribute goods to people in the area.

“We want to put a different perspective on what they’re learning, to put a little more emphasis on making a difference in the world,” says Brian Combs, NKU’s campus minister.

Your Spring Break - just the break so many have been dreaming of.

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