Black students will meet challenge of higher standards

And it's a deceit to tell those who don't that they're ready for a major university

To the editor:

In response to Linda Howard's Nov. 11 essay on the debate over raising admission standards at UNLV and UNR:

As director of Afro-American Studies at UNLV, I care about black students. But unlike the opponents of raised admission requirements, I also believe in black students. I believe that many — though not all — black middle-school students today will rise to the challenge and meet the raised standards in four years. I also know that some of those who don't meet them will show that they still warrant entrance through our alternative admissions requirements.

But I'm enough of a realist to know that those who don't meet either the regular or the alternative admissions requirements are not yet ready for the university, and that it is the greatest deceit to tell them that they are. It is nothing less than setting them up for failure.

Retention and graduation rates for black students at UNLV are as poor as they are in large part because under-prepared students are gaining admission to an educational environment they are not yet ready to handle. Leaving the entrance GPA at 2.5 will continue to send to those students the false signal that they are prepared for university-level work, when in fact they are not.

The issue isn't just access; the issue is successful access. One of the greatest falsehoods being propagated in this debate is that access to higher education will be denied to some. But of course access is always there in the form of the community college, an institution that is better prepared to provide remedial education.

Would we prefer to see under-prepared students admitted to the university where they will continue to drop out after two or three semesters? Or would we rather see them build their skills at the community college, transfer to UNLV, and go on from there to productive and satisfying careers? UNLV is a major university, not a remedial academy. Professors can help students, of course, and we do it all the time. But we cannot undo years of under-preparation. To try to do so would be grossly unfair to those of our students who are ready for academic work at the university.

If you find the current state of black student retention and graduation at UNLV to be unacceptable, then urge the regents to approve raising the entrance standards over a period of four years. If you find those rates to be acceptable, then urge the regents to leave them as they are. My concern for black students makes my own choice clear.

Rainer Spencer
Las Vegas

Your Turn

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Regent Howard disputes tenure for UNLV professor

By Nick Mojave
CARSON CITY - Fireworks exploded again at the Nevada Board of Regents meeting Wednesday as Regent Linda Howard requested that a UNLV faculty member be singled out for tenure approval due to "concerns of members of the community."

Liberal Arts Associate Professor Rainier Spencer's proposed tenure was objected to by Howard, for reasons that she would not disclose because it was not posted on the Board of Regents agenda, as required by Nevada Open Meeting Law.

Spencer, in an e-mail Saturday, expressed his ideas as to why his name was singled out.

"The only thing I could imagine is that she is upset that I took an opposing view on the issue of raising UNLV’s entrance GPA a while back," Spencer said. "But I'm sure that a person in the powerful and responsible position of University System Regent would not abuse the public trust by holding grudges and using that power to retaliate at tenure time against faculty members who have exercised their academic freedom."

Regent Steve Sisolak, via e-mail Sunday, said he's talked with Howard about the Spencer issue.

"She was very upset at some comments that Dr. Spencer had allegedly made when we were having the debate on raising the GPA awhile back," said Sisolak. "I told her that I thought there was a more appropriate time to address her issues, but she insisted on doing what she did."

Spencer was unsure as to what Howard meant when she said the community might have concerns about Spencer's tenure.

"I often get compliments from Afro-Americans I don't even know, who tell me they enjoy my two distance education classes on Afro-American history that air on [cable]," Spencer said. "They thank me for founding the first and only degree-granting Afro American Studies program the state of Nevada has ever had."

As UNLV representatives attempted to notify Spencer of the debate so that he could attend Thursday's session of the Regents meeting, tempers brewed inside the Sarah Winemucca Hall at Western Nevada Community College.
At one point, Howard left her seat and privately confronted UNLV President Carol Harter in the back of the meeting room in a visibly terse conversation.

Several issues played themselves out over the course of the debate: application of open meeting law; the established policy of granting tenure to faculty members; whether not granting tenure to one individual, but giving tenure to the rest would prompt a lawsuit; and exactly why this particular faculty member had been singled out by Howard.

CCSN Faculty Senate Chair Joan McGee voiced her opposition to the change of precedent brought by blocking a professor's tenure approval.

"The faculty senate strenuously objects to changing the process because of one agenda by a regent," McGee said.

Howard replied, "I find Dr. McGee's remarks disrespectful and rude. From a faculty senate chair, I find that inappropriate."

But Saturday, Spencer was just as concerned as McGee about the tenure issue.

"It was more than a bit disconcerting for a member of the Board of Regents to single out my tenure application for scrutiny, particularly when there was no evidence offered whatsoever that my record of teaching, scholarship, or service was in any way substandard," he said.

As regents chair Doug Seastrand called a five-minute recess, UNLV administrators feverishly left the meeting room to attempt to arrange for Spencer to fly to Northern Nevada, and also notify him of the debate regarding his tenure.

Others attempted to figure out why Spencer, who helped establish the ethnic studies program at UNLV and has been featured on several of the school's "Be a Rebel" posters, would be singled out by Howard, who in the past has been a proponent of such programs.

As the debate proceeded, some of the regents apparently were working on a method of quickly moving past the Spencer issue before it became another Board of Regents spectacle.

Sisolak admitted that his goal was to prevent another debacle.

"I used a 'parliamentary procedure' to get the issue addressed, with no discussion personally as it related to Dr. Spencer. That is why, I moved to cut off debate and call the question before Linda could make any comments about Dr. Spencer," Sisolak said.

Shortly after the recess, Regent Doug Hill moved that the board revisit the Spencer issue.

Immediately after a second from Sisolak, Hill moved to call the motion to question, a
parliamentary maneuver which ended all discussion on the issue, if passed by a two-thirds margin. With only regents Howard and Tom Kirkpatrick opposing the motion, discussion on the issue was tabled and the matter was put to a vote.

Regent Howard initially voted no on granting tenure, but after regents Kirkpatrick and Howard Rosenberg abstained, Howard also changed her vote to an abstention. The other nine regents who were present voted to affirm Spencer's tenure.
Regents, profs dispute tenure waiver

By Jennifer Knight <jknight@lasvegassun.com>

September 17, 2003

UNLV faculty members voted unanimously Tuesday to refuse a Board of Regents request that professors waive their right to be notified when their tenure is discussed in public, calling the request "grossly unfair."

"When (the waiver) first came across my desk, it wasn't made clear whether people were going to be required to do this and my comment was, why would anyone be stupid enough to sign this?" said John Readence, faculty senate chairman at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

A university system official said early today the waiver form, which was not voted on by regents, drew so many complaints that the request has been withdrawn.

"Because of the reaction nobody is going to be asked to sign a waiver," said Tom Ray, UCCSN's general counsel. "This is really a non-issue. It just blows me away."

Ray said the form was an effort to simplify the notification process for faculty. The law requires anyone who is being discussed in an open meeting to be notified 21 days in advance. Ray said by the time he received the names of those up for tenure, it was too late to comply with the law.

Aside from the opposition by UNLV's faculty senate, faculty senates at the Community College of Southern Nevada; the University of Nevada, Reno; Truckee Meadows Community College; and Western Nevada Community College also voted to refuse signing such a form.

While the request has left some faculty members feeling uncertain about the tenure process, one regent said she believes the board should have the opportunity to freely deliberate on a professor's qualifications before awarding a lifetime appointment.

"I think we should be more conscientious when granting tenure because it seems like the other board members are afraid to not grant tenure," said Regent Linda Howard. "Just because they've been approved by their peer review committee doesn't mean that there aren't concerns. It doesn't hurt to take a closer look."
Discussion about gathering more information from candidates for tenure began after Howard challenged the tenure approval of a UNLV faculty member.

Since then, Board of Regents Chairman Stavros Anthony has moved to provide more background information on tenure candidates, which led to the need for waivers, in case regents wanted to discuss those individuals, he said.

"I realized I didn't know anything about the (tenure candidates) and I didn't know their background," Anthony said. "I asked the chancellor to put information in a packet about their background. I just kind of thought it was a simple deal but this got a little complicated."

Some faculty members have criticized the policy.

"For regents at this point to start picking and choosing professors to look at, I think, is an attempt to alter something that really works and has worked so far," said Mitzi Ware, CCSN's faculty senate chair. "I think people are very disappointed."

Normally, regents approve several tenure cases at a time without discussion. This final approval usually follows a process of scrutiny by administrators and a peer review, Ware said.

Regent Steve Sisolak said the complication occurs when regents take the information and decide to discuss the qualifications of faculty members without their permission.

"The fact that we are now asking to see backup material on each of these people up for tenure means that these people could be discussed at the meeting," Sisolak said. "So that's what caused (the need for) waivers."

The origins of the debate can be traced a March 19 meeting of the Board of Regents, at which the board discussed the tenure application of UNLV professor Rainier Spencer.

Spencer had written a letter to the Las Vegas Review-Journal stating his opinion that black students would rise to the challenge of meeting higher admissions standards at the university.

Howard took exception to that, saying she believes that higher admissions standards could unfairly block black students from receiving an education. Other black leaders agreed with her, Howard said.

"I believe he used the opportunity to degrade black leaders to gain favor with the university president in order to gain tenure," Howard said.

Spencer said he was simply exercising his academic freedom and "the alternative is censorship, and nobody wants to see that."
Howard was unable to discuss Spencer's tenure application in March because he had not been notified in advance.

Tenure for Spencer, an professor of Afro-American studies, was granted.

Howard's challenge "had nothing to do with tenure or (Spencer's) academic record," UNLV Provost Ray Alden said during Tuesday's faculty senate meeting. "It was a political, adversarial relationship."

Former UNLV faculty senate chairman Bill Robinson said the move to discuss faculty members without their presence is unfair.

"Any time they have an administrator who is up for a promotion, they have a closed personnel session," Robinson said. "Any time there is a student with a problem there is a closed session. What they're saying here is the one group to discuss in public is faculty. What is so different about faculty where we have to be discussed in public when everyone else gets a closed personnel session?"