

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS OFFICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY
INVESTIGATIVE REPORT (Privileged and Confidential)

Complainant: Third Party Complainants	Department: External
Respondent(s): Dr. Zandria Robinson	Department: Sociology
Investigation Conducted By: V. Latosha Dexter	
Assigned Attorney: Melanie Murry	
Complaint Date: June 6, 2015	Report Date: June 23, 2015

Summary of Complaint

On June 6, 2015, President David Rudd received a complaint via Twitter from author Peter Hasson which consisted of an article accusing Dr. Zandria Robinson, the Respondent, of racist behavior. Thereafter, the University received complaints from alumnae and community members regarding Respondent's social media statements.

Specific Allegations

The article by Peter Hasson, "Another prof. blasts whites on social media", was posted at <http://www.campusreform.org/?ID=6549>. Hasson restates several of Respondent's Facebook posts or tweets that he alleges are discriminatory. Examples from the article include:

- Robinson says applying to graduate school isn't exceptional for white students "because they have white privilege."
- "SO DON'T YOU EVER LET ME HEAR TELL OF YOU PERPETUATING THESE RACIST LIES AGAIN. NOT EVEN IN YOUR HEAD. NOT EVEN IN JEST," Robinson warned. "Because if you do I will come for you. And I will do so in public."
- Similarly, in a tweet that same month, she declared that she doesn't want her daughter "in school with snotty privileged whites."
- In a recent Facebook post, Robinson unequivocally sided with Grundy, declaring "white college aged males" a "problem population."

The University also received other complaints from alumnae and community members, one stating that "In no way can this behavior create a safe learning environment for young people of ANY ethnicity (sic). Ms. Robinson should be disciplined and apologise (sic) publicly, or fired." Other complaints alleged that Respondent's statements were divisive and deeply offensive.

Documents/Evidence Reviewed

- Campus Reform article "Another prof. blasts whites on social media" by Peter Hasson
- Respondent's Twitter page
- New South Negress blog by Respondent (newsouthnegress.com)
- Respondent's Facebook posts and comments from November 4, 2014
- Biographical information for Professor Anna Mueller
- PBS Documentary summary "American Promise"
- Pop South interview with Respondent regarding *This Ain't Chicago*

Investigative Findings

Respondent was interviewed on June 15, 2015. Respondent does not believe the complaints are personal but part of a more generalized movement that targets young African American women professors such as Saida Grundy at Boston University and Tressie Cottom at Emory University.

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS OFFICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY
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Respondent has several social media accounts. Respondent has Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr accounts as well as a blog called New South Negress. None of these sites have a disclaimer that the views expressed are her views and not necessarily those of the UofM but she is willing to add such a disclaimer if requested. Respondent's Facebook page is private and requires a person to be her "friend" but it does identify her as a UofM professor. Although she has made public Facebook posts in the past, she has since made all of her Facebook posts private as of June 7, 2015. Respondent's Instagram account does not identify her as a UofM professor. Respondent's Twitter account was public until June 7, 2015, at which time she made it private; it has not and does not identify her as a UofM professor. In regard to her blog, New South Negress, Respondent identifies herself as a UofM professor and also maintains the syllabi for her courses on the blog. Respondent's Tumblr account does not identify her by name.

Respondent was questioned regarding some of her online comments and the allegation that such comments are bigoted or racist and would result in dismissal if made by a white professor. Respondent does not believe that a comparison can be made between her statements and similar statements made by a white professor – "it's not a one to one comparison." Further, as an African American she can hold prejudiced views but not racist views because racism is about a position of power. Respondent stated that her posts are her personal opinions which are also supported by research.

In regard to the November 4, 2014, Facebook post regarding graduate school admissions her audience was intended to be anyone, including students of color, who believe that students of color receive preferential treatment in admission. Respondent has seen it happen in Ph.D. programs where white students will say "you'll be fine and get in because you're black." She referred to literature on the "imposter syndrome" and how it relates to students of color who diminish their own achievements in attaining graduate school admission because of the belief that they have received preferential treatment. Respondent stated that her comment "I will come for you" referred to the fact that she would address disagreements with her position in a public forum, such as social media, rather than in private. It was never intended as a physical threat. Respondent believes that white students should hear this type of discourse and should understand the broader context of unearned privilege because of race. Respondent shared comments from the November 4 Facebook post which was liked by 216 people and shared 24 times. Many of the comments were positive and in support of Respondent's statements. Respondent's position is that the post is not just about race but also is about the intersection of race, class and gender, i.e. lower class white students might have the same obstacles as a black student.

Another example discussed was her post regarding not wanting her daughter "in school with snotty privileged whites". Respondent referred to research being conducted by UofM Assistant Professor Anna Mueller whose UofM bio states that one of her areas of focus is "how schools, as social organizations, shape social relationships and opportunities to learn, thereby affecting the life chances of children in terms of education, health, and wellbeing." Respondent opined that the available research shows that certain private school environments composed of a middle to upper class white majority breed a culture of drug use, mean girls and competitiveness. She also referred to the PBS documentary "American Promise" which chronicled the path and challenges of two middle-class African American boys who entered a prestigious and historically white private school.

Respondent was also questioned about her agreement with Grundy that white college males are a problem population. Respondent related that she has been threatened by male students

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS OFFICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY
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at other schools. Although she has never had a problem at the UofM, she does carry those previous experiences with her.

Respondent believes that it would be unfair for a white student to say they could not get a fair chance in her class after reading her comments. She strives to create a safe learning environment for all of her students regardless of race. Respondent stated that Twitter is a space where one can “play with language” and things are said “tongue in cheek”; she does not see herself as having to decode everything she says. She acknowledged that she is walking a fine line between shielding students from discomfort and exposing them to the real world and believes discomfort should be part of the learning experience. She believes that her comments are covered by academic freedom because she is speaking from a research perspective and based on data. When she is speaking she is “moving with the academic freedom of here’s the research and here’s the articulation of the research.” In Respondent’s opinion, if UofM is a public institution and is committed to the community it serves then the issues she discusses are the kinds of conversations we need to have.

The Respondent tendered her resignation from the UofM on June 11, 2015.

Conclusion

UM 1606 is the University’s Academic Freedom policy. The policy states that “[w]hen faculty members speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations.” It goes on to state that they should be cognizant of how their statements may be viewed and “exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they do not speak for the University.”

Respondent’s comments were made as a citizen and not on University sanctioned accounts. Further, as a public institution the University is cognizant of its First Amendment responsibilities which are supported by Tennessee Board of Regents and University policy which include the “free search for and exposition of truth” as an objective. The concept of academic freedom assumes that there will be free inquiry and promotion of controversial views that may at times critically scrutinize conventional wisdom. Respondent was able to articulate the bases for all of her statements and to place them in the greater context of research conducted or ongoing. Further, Respondent’s primary research interests include race, class, and gender. She has written a book titled *This Ain’t Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South* and co-edited an article titled “Re-Positioning Race: Prophetic Research in a Post-Racial Obama Age.” Therefore, her comments which became the subject of the complaints are related in part to the issues upon which she is academically focused.

However, based on her own statements, Respondent did not take steps to ensure that the public was aware that her statements were not the statements or opinions of the University. She did not have disclaimers listed on any of her social media accounts and her Facebook and blog both identified her as a UofM professor. She also posted her course syllabi on her blog which could lead to a perception that the blog was University approved. In addition, although her ideas and beliefs may be entitled to general protection, Respondent still had a responsibility to “remember that the public may judge the profession and the University by their utterances.” (UM 1606 Academic Freedom) Therefore, she had an obligation to remember the context in which she made such statements and that the limited space of social media may lead to misperceptions or misunderstandings of her statements because of the inability to fully discuss the research and/or data upon which her statements were based.

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS OFFICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY
INVESTIGATIVE REPORT (Privileged and Confidential)

Recommendation(s)

Although Respondent has resigned her position with the University of Memphis, in the event she should return to employment in the future she should be counseled regarding the requirements of UM 1606.

It is also recommended that consideration be given to including information or guidelines in the Faculty Handbook regarding the appropriate use of personal social media. The following are some suggested issues for inclusion in such guidelines: 1) that personal blogs and social media accounts should not be hosted by the UofM; 2) the usage of disclaimers for those disclosing their affiliation with the UofM on personal social media to ensure that third parties understand that views expressed are personal views and not the views of UofM; 3) guidelines regarding usage of UofM logos and branding on personal social media sites; and 4) a reminder of UM 1606 with best practices.