

**GUEST OPINION**

**UNL basking in mediocrity**

By Joyce Ann Joyce

When I attended orientation for new faculty members in August 1989, I was told that a fair number of the students here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln were from towns of no more than 300 people and that UNL would begin these students' first encounter with black people and other minorities. No one added what is now blatantly obvious to me: that these students are no more insensitive to the humanity of African-Americans than many of their white professors at UNL.

On Oct. 23, I returned from a two-trip lecture circuit, where I participated in The First Annual Black Writers Symposium, organized by poet Haki Madhubuti, at Chicago State University, and from giving a lecture on Afrocentric Literary Criticism for one of the leading Afrocentric philosophers, Molefi Asante, at Temple University. I returned home enriched and energized by having worked with scholars and students who share my cultural roots and interests to find that the College of Arts and Sciences Grading Appeals Committee had voted to change one of my student's grades from an F to a C and another from an F to a D+.

The dean's committee based its decision in part on the report of the acting chair of the English Department's Grading Appeals Committee, who had regraded my students' exams. Although I do not know of another accredited university in the country where any other professor can regrade another's students' papers and although I am told that doing so is even against this university's policies and that I should present this matter to the AAUP, I, at this time, have no intention of pursuing legal recourses. Simply put, I do not think the university is worth the effort. I refuse to lose valuable time from a productive scholarly career to attempt to change a department satisfied with and basking in its less than mediocre stature.

I came to UNL quite excited about teaching in a new environment, about having new colleagues and about interacting with my students. During the first semester, numerous things happened that made it clear that the English department had long been in a state of stasis. Its policy is to hire candidates on the beginning and oc-

asionally the advanced assistant professor level. Thus, most of the professors in the English department have been here at least 10 to 15 years, for it takes six years to acquire tenure. Therefore, the department recruits professors who have had very little teaching experience and who are held hostage to conformity and departmental demands for six years. By the time they become tenured, the UNL mold has firmly set. The English department, in other words, has almost no turnover of faculty. It, as a consequence, is quite non-intellectual and non-progressive and it lacks rigid standards and proper procedures. For example, this summer the as-

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sociate chair called me to tell me that the Grading Appeals Committee had voted to change one of my students' grades. No one showed me — to date — a copy of this student's appeal; therefore, I was not given a chance to respond to the student's allegations. The associate chair merely said that he was signing the proper form in agreement with the committee.

Also, one of the graduating seniors who received a failing grade in my class went to the acting chair of the appeals committee to discuss the appeals process. The chair of the appeals committee volunteered to give this student an independent study course so that he could graduate. Thus, it was understood from the beginning that this student would receive a passing grade. Not only was this professor's action unconscionable in that it reflects what should be a conflict of interest, but also the student was semi-illiterate. I should not have been surprised. For last year, I had a graduate student in one of my classes who could not write a simple declarative sentence.

Unfortunately, those students who filed appeals this summer really do not know that the education they are receiving in the English department here is inferior compared to many

other schools in the country. During my two long years here, I have had both undergraduate and graduate students tell me that they do well in English courses without reading the books and that they have never been challenged as much as they are in my courses. The irony of this is that I, to a small degree, relaxed my standards once I saw that most of the students I teach have no idea how to write a paragraph or an essay. It is quite shameful for the university and the state that this is the first year that the English department has had a writing lab available for students, many of whom must be coerced to use it.

The letter I received from the Arts and Sciences Grading Appeals Committee makes it quite clear that the College of Arts and Sciences sees my instruction here as inferior and that it believes other professors who are not specialists in my field are better judges of my students' work than I. The letter also said that my classes are "emotional," "highly charged" and "hostile." I am a black woman who teaches African-American literature, an area whose subject focuses predominantly on slavery, racism and oppression. I teach this subject to white students who have never had to confront their racism. My class demands that they do so. When students are correct and profound in my classes, I say so; when they are superficial and racist, I also say so.

If I were a white man or a white woman, the students would be more willing to accept my leadership and instruction. Even some of my black students would prefer white professors. They want liberals who will feel sorry for them and let them graduate illiterate.

What the Arts and Sciences appeals committee and the English Department Appeals Committee did to me by overturning my grades is not very different from the way the Senate treated Anita Hill. For, in the eyes of those who exercise power in this country, a black woman is fair game for disrespect and discreditability.

Joyce is a UNL professor of English.

Editor's note: Joyce said she had received a letter from the chairman of the English department stating that he had written to the grading appeals committee to question the procedures used in its decisions.

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