UNLV Black Professionals Address to Faculty Senate—December 8, 2009

Presented by Dr. Rainier Spencer

Good afternoon. I represent an organization named UNLV Black Professionals, composed of black professional staff and teaching faculty who are committed to the professional development—indeed, to the professional protection—of black professionals at UNLV. We have been meeting for several years prior to officially launching ourselves a few weeks ago. Copies of our charter are being distributed to you, so I will not go into explicit detail in terms of what that document covers. I will, however, reference the most important items contained within it. First, our purpose. We believe that a crisis situation exists for black professionals at UNLV. Even after more than 50 years of existence, the institution remains an isolating, often unsupportive, and sometimes overtly hostile environment for black professionals. The organization’s purpose is to provide a voice for articulating the collective concerns of black professionals at UNLV so as to confront this longstanding crisis in an active and constructive way. While the organization does not presume to represent every single black professional at UNLV, it nonetheless stands up and invites black professionals to engage in positive action through its efforts.

Let me address right up front any questions as to the seriousness of this crisis, for it has existed for so very long that it has become the expected and unchallenged norm at this institution. In terms of teaching faculty, I need only remind us of the absolutely appalling record of this institution in terms of hiring, mentoring, tenuring, retaining, and promoting black faculty over the past half-century. Despite a number of direct hires at the full-professor level in recent years, we must acknowledge that the real test of an institution’s commitment to minority faculty is its treatment of them from initial hiring at the entry level to retirement at senior status. On this
score, over the past 52 years, UNLV holds the distinction of having promoted from associate professor to full professor exactly 4 black faculty members. That is less than one per decade of this institution’s existence. While UNLV obviously has not hired enough black teaching faculty over its history, I think we can nonetheless agree that it has hired enough to have promoted more than 4 to full professor by now. This is simply not acceptable. Nor is this a secret, as may be seen by directing your attention to the screen and to the highlighted comments of former Faculty Senate Chair Bill Robinson, who three years ago noted the very serious problem this institution has in regard to black faculty retention. To our knowledge, however, the promised Faculty Senate consideration of this issue never took place in spring 2007. The UNLV Black Professionals therefore challenge the Senate to make it take place during spring of 2010.

In the matter of professional staff, it has become clear to the UNLV Black Professionals that there are a set of hostile conditions that many of us have experienced, although we did not realize it until we came out of our isolation and began comparing notes with each other. These conditions include the typical glass ceiling, but also an increasing marginalization in the workplace such that black professionals in mid- to upper-level positions are given less responsibility and less work than other persons in their units, leading to humiliating experiences in meetings and personal interactions. Indeed, one black professional was on leave for nearly two weeks recently and received not one email or voicemail related to work, and upon returning discovered subordinates performing tasks and having knowledge that this employee was not given, even though these should have been the employee’s responsibility. Inevitably we find that attempts to be professional on our part and to resolve these unprofessional situations result only in our being humiliated even further. This is neither professional nor acceptable.
In light of these now-entrenched institutional practices, the UNLV Black Professionals dedicate themselves to the following five principles:

1. The UNLV Black Professionals believe that black professionals should be represented horizontally in the University structure (administrative and academic) in numbers that are proportionate to their representation in the local community served by this institution.

2. The UNLV Black Professionals believe black professionals should also be represented vertically in the University structure (administrative and academic), and not to be entrenched disproportionately at lower-level positions.

3. The UNLV Black Professionals believe that aggressive action must be taken to eliminate the gap existing currently between black entry-level and senior professionals (such as are to be found) at UNLV.

4. The crisis situation at UNLV cannot be addressed without the institution acknowledging, taking responsibility for, and correcting the failure to retain black professionals over the years.

5. Finally, the UNLV Black Professionals believe that there should be more than a single NSHE Regent who takes an active interest in the issues, problems, and circumstances of black professionals and black students at UNLV.

As an organization, the UNLV Black Professionals stands ready to assist with any constructive efforts along these lines that are truly designed to gain results. Thank you for your attention. Are there any questions?
The Board of Regents met November 30 and December 1, 2006, on our campus in the Stan Fulton Building.

As usual, the first morning is consumed with many committee meetings. I chose to go to the Student and Academic Affairs committee, rather than to the Audit committee, which apparently was a mistake. As reported in the media and by others at the Board meeting, the Audit committee included a number of adventures for both UNLV and UNR. Unfortunately, I missed them, and cannot give you any more insight into what happened.

1. In the SAA meeting, we did have hear an outstanding presentation from Bill Sullivan and his staff on the GEAR UP program his department (CAEO) runs. This program, supported by eight-figure grants, helps prepare low-income middle and high school students for college. It appears to be a smashing success, and now serves more than 24,000 students across Nevada.

2. A proposed policy on student discipline that arose out of the problems in the School of Dental Medicine moved out of committee and will go to the Board. The changes are that anyone who holds a hearing on a student disciplinary matter would have to go through training provided by System legal counsel, and the process of how a student’s record can be cleaned of disciplinary notations has been clarified.

3. There was also a report on transfer articulation, which concluded that neither UNLV nor UNR was fully in compliance with Board policy with regard to transfers from the community colleges, but that both should be by December 31 of this year.

4. In 2005, the NSHE hired 190 new faculty, of which 10 were African-American and 6 were Hispanic. Of those 16, only 7 were hired as tenure-track or tenured on hire. When you add to this the fact that we keep no data on retention of African-American or Hispanic faculty, and there are numerous anecdotal stories of poor retention practices, it is difficult to say we are supportive of diversity among the faculty. This is an issue that will be coming before the Senate in the spring.