

USF diversity administrator resigns after hotly rebuking Currall

By Nancy McCann
CONTRIBUTOR

The university's associate vice president for diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity has resigned in protest of what he calls "one of the most disrespectful, thoughtless, offensive, and racist acts to have ever been carried out at the USF campus."

In an April 12 email to a USF administrator, Cecil E. Howard called President Steve Currall's decision to reconfigure the responsibilities of the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity (DIEO) a "racially biased move."

Howard wrote that he had begun to plan his departure – effective today – because he could not "remain in silent acquiescence and give credence to further racist actions."

The university strongly denied Howard's accusations.

The changes at DIEO, which Currall announced March 12, are part of the university's efforts to "reimagine and reinvest" in the office to "improve service to students, faculty, staff and the broader community," administrators said.

"Mr. Howard's assertion that the new strategic direction for DIEO is racially motivated is false," said university spokesperson Adam Freeman.

Before he decided to resign, Howard filed two charges of discrimination with the Florida Commission on Human Relations, Freeman said. The first was dismissed and the second is pending.

"USF cannot discuss a pending investigation other than to say that the claims appear meritless," Freeman said.

Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman,

the university's interim vice president for institutional equity, said USF is taking "unprecedented steps to reimagine and reinvest" in DIEO as it works to strengthen "our diversity, equity and inclusion efforts – an intentional and renewed effort over the past year."

In recent months, Hordge-Freeman said in a statement, the university has taken "several significant steps" as it undertakes a "comprehensive review" of DIEO.

It has hosted town halls, conducted an online survey, met with key community organizations like the NAACP and toured diverse neighborhoods in local communities, she said.

Howard, who did not respond to requests for comment from *The Crow's Nest*, does not precisely spell out what Currall did to offend him and 10 other "highly credentialed, professional employees" in DIEO.

But he pointed to March 12, the day Currall announced that some of DIEO's responsibilities were being shifted to "a new Equity Compliance unit within the USF Office of Compliance and Ethics."

Moving compliance on equal employment, Title IX and the Americans with Disabilities Act will "streamline the processes for these essential university functions" and better serve students, faculty and staff, Currall said.

But Howard, a lawyer and veteran diversity administrator who came to USF in 2016, said he and others "were subjected to what I perceived as one of the most disrespectful, thoughtless, offensive, and racist acts to have ever been carried out at the USF campus."

In his email to Hordge-

Freeman on April 12, Howard said reorganization is "just the beginning of a concerted dismantling of DIEO and its voices. If that is the case, underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities at USF are in for a rough ride."

Howard listed 25 "major initiatives" that DIEO had planned for 2021-2022 and said he was "extremely doubtful that these initiatives could be adequately carried out with what is now a skeleton crew and may become even thinner in the near future."

Some DIEO staff members have been transferred to the Office of Compliance and Ethics, Freeman said.

Howard's departure and blistering criticism come at an awkward juncture for the Currall administration.

In June 2020, shortly after the death of George Floyd prompted a national resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement, 88 Black faculty and staff members at USF sent a call to action to Currall.

In their letter, they said "targeted anti-racist policies, procedures and an adequate grievance process must be established (or improved) to effectively address systemic racism."

They called for mandatory sensitivity training for administrators, increased racial and ethnic diversity in both leadership and faculty positions, the creation of racial accountability protocols in the faculty tenure and promotion process, an evaluation of salary disparities and increased funding in African and Latin American studies.

In a statement that same week, Currall and Haywood Brown, who was then USF's vice president for institutional equity, said USF would

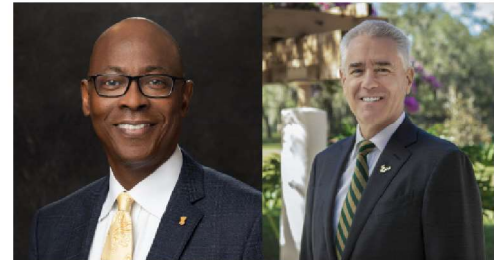
"redouble efforts to be a force of positive change."

Those efforts will include professional development of faculty and staff and "helping to ensure that hiring practices for administrators and faculty are free from bias and reflect USF's commitment to diversity," the statement said.

Two months later, Currall issued a detailed update on steps the university is taking.

Those steps include the investment of \$500,000 in research projects that address the concept, origin and consequences of systemic racism, an increase in Black student outreach and strengthening relationships between USF and the Black community.

Currall also announced that Brown had been appointed to the university's 11-member Executive Leadership Council and that Hordge-Freeman – a sociology professor who drafted the June letter signed by Black faculty and staff – had been appointed senior adviser to Currall and the provost on diversity and inclusion.



COURTESY OF USF

Cecil E. Howard (left) calls the way that changes in his office's responsibilities were handled "one of the most disrespectful, thoughtless, offensive, and racist acts" in university history. But President Steve Currall says the changes will "streamline the processes" for ensuring that USF complies with requirements on equal employment, Title IX and the ADA.

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** Most recently, Cecil E. Howard, USF's associate vice president for diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity, resigned after hotly rebuking Currall's reconfiguration of the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity, calling it a "racially biased move."

** Last fall, the stunning announcement to close and reconfigure the College of Education left many students, faculty and local school superintendents fuming. Nearly three months after the announcement, Currall's administration reversed the decision and declared that the College of Education would remain at the university.

** In April, the university sent inquiries to developers for building on the USF Forest Preserve without

consulting faculty and students who rely on the 769 acres of protected land for research and outdoor learning. USF has since received eight proposals for its development.

** Confusion over a substantial budget deficit outlined by Currall and the way administration has handled it prompted fiery criticism from some faculty leaders. In May, USF Faculty Senate President Jim Boaz confirmed that faculty considered a vote of no confidence in Currall's administration.

Despite past tensions, Boaz admits Currall's leadership wasn't always problematic.

"I'm surprised and disappointed to see him resign the position," Boaz told *The Crow's Nest*. "It was a really challenging year – so unusual

in terms of things we had to deal with. He [Currall] did a number of things well. I think he would agree that some things did not go so well. All in all, I would have been happy to see him continue."

** Throughout his presidency, Currall drew criticism from the St. Petersburg campus and its political allies for the way his administration treated the campus in the planning and implementation of consolidation.

Some of the criticism came from the Pinellas County legislators who initiated consolidation in 2018 in the belief that St. Petersburg and its students would benefit.

One of those legislators, Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, became an outspoken critic of Currall's administration and the Board of Trustees.

On Monday, Brandes told the Tampa Bay Times that Currall's departure is "a positive step for the university ... It will help attract better talent, more resources, and help the university move forward."

"I really think that a new leadership team will be able to take USF in a bold new direction," Brandes told *The Crow's Nest*. "From the perspective of St. Petersburg, the next president needs to embrace the uniqueness of our campus and help develop a plan for the long-term future."

Around the country, the job of college president has become a life in a pressure cooker, with the daunting challenges of budgeting and fundraising while dealing with the demands of students, faculty, alumni and athletic boosters.

When Brown left DIEO in March for a post in USF Health, Hordge-Freeman was named to replace him as interim vice president for institutional equity. In September, Currall's efforts on diversity and inclusion were jolted when all six members of a diversity committee at the College of Arts and Sciences resigned in a ringing rebuke of the administration.

The diversity committee "is disappointed that the voice representing the largest college in the university is being silenced, ignored or 'mediated,'" the members said.

"Our effort to engage with the USF administration at multiple levels has ultimately led to a reassertion of an academic hierarchy that reinforces, rather than reduces, the 'ush culture' at USF," the letter said.

Meanwhile, *The Crow's Nest* has reported in recent months that the number of Black and Hispanic faculty and administrators has remained essentially unchanged for years.

Read Currall's March 12 announcement, Howard's April 12 email, Freeman's full statement and Hordge-Freeman's full statement on crowstestpote.com.

According to the American Council on Education, college presidents serve an average of 6.5 years, which is down from seven years in 2011 and 8.5 years in 2006.

Currall's predecessor, Judy Genshaft, served for 19 years before retiring in 2019. The five presidents who preceded her each served for at least five years.

Board of Trustees Chair Will Weatherford sent an email to faculty and staff praising Currall for his leadership in helping USF achieve successes in its national recognition, philanthropic efforts, construction of new on-campus facilities and the development of a strategic plan to make USF one of the nation's top 25 public universities.