

Kia Lee's Statement: April 2019

About a year ago, I was asked to help serve on the search and screen committee for the new VC of Enrollment Management. Myself and another staff member were both representatives from the Admissions Office. It was a search that I was excited to serve on because I felt that this new position would help the campus and our office with meeting the Chancellor's four guideposts. At that point, I had worked in the Admissions Office for over 8 years and had seen the campus undergo budget cuts, restructures, campus construction projects, and the merging with UW-Barron County. My hope was that the new VC would help provide clear direction for our office in terms of reaching new markets and to help alleviate some of the high-level work that Admissions had taken on over the years.

Throughout the search process, the Chancellor repeatedly stated that we had a strong Admissions team - which is true. We continually met our numbers for the incoming freshmen class, have maintained the academic profile, and have continued to increase the number of students of color each year. As far as recruitment, the Chancellor wanted someone who could help us recruit out of state. This is something that the Admissions office had not focused on in the past so I was excited to work with this new individual and to hear about their vision.

During the search, it was clear that Albert Colom was a strong candidate. He had a lot of experiences at a wide range of institutions and provided solid examples for both recruitment and retention. Personally, I was most excited about his background being a person of color (Puerto Rican) and also a first generation college student. The campus had hired a search firm to help with this national search and part of their responsibilities was to do the background and reference checks on all of the candidates we chose to bring to campus. The consultants did not present any issues or concerns to the Search and Screen committee about Albert Colom. I am unsure whether they brought any concerns to the Chancellor or not.

Albert Colom started in his position as VC of Enrollment Management in early fall. I did not have very many interactions with him other than having short conversations with him at a few of our early campus visits/events and during our initial Admissions team meeting. What I did notice early on was that Heather Kretz would be constantly scheduled to either meet with him or to join him at various meetings. I attributed this to VC Colom needing Heather to serve as a resource and guide while he learned about UWEC's enrollment. There were days where Heather's calendar would consist of back to back meetings with VC Colom. Within the first few weeks, I started to see and feel a change in Heather's usual happy and positive demeanor. Whenever she was in the Admissions Office, she would shut her door (she rarely did that) and in between her meetings, myself and other staff would sometimes catch her with tears in her eyes but she would just brush it away.

It wasn't until mid-October when Heather confided in me about her negative interactions with VC Colom, how he continually questioned Heather's ability to be the Admissions Director (during their first one-on-one meeting), passively put her down in meetings that she had with other directors, and on multiple occasions told her that she needed to start looking for another job. I could tell that these along with many other interactions with VC Colom were affecting Heather's mental and emotional well-being. In my 8 years in the office, I have witnessed Heather deal with a lot of conflicts and disagreements (from prospective students and parents to staff), however, this was nothing like that. Her interactions with VC Colom were on a whole different level. Myself and the other senior staff members encouraged Heather to contact HR and Affirmative Action to report his behavior.

I did not witness any of VC Colom's behavior until we had our senior staff meeting with him on November 6th. This meeting was to go over all of the Admissions information that VC Colom had requested. We were going to talk through budgets, discuss current initiatives and recruitment plans, discuss communication plans, and go over enrollment data, etc. Throughout this 2+ hour long meeting, VC Colom would continually interrupt Heather Kretz as she was speaking, ask for various pieces of data and then be dismissive when Heather was able to provide it, and kept referring to Heather Kretz as "miss bossy pants." Throughout that meeting I was both shocked and paralyzed at the inappropriate behavior that I was witnessing from VC Colom. I did not say anything during that meeting because he is in a position of power. I regret it to this day and wish I would have called him out on his behavior. In talking with Heather afterwards, she indicated that his behavior towards her during that meeting was not even his worst.

As part of the senior staff team, we were concerned for Heather Kretz and also concerned about the future of our office and campus. Throughout the next few weeks, we started to receive information from a source who was previously from the University of North Florida and had worked with VC Colom. He provided us with various statements from previous staff members at UNF who experienced similar behavior from Colom. It was evident that VC Colom has a pattern of behavior: he targets strong leaders on campuses and does everything in his power to demean them and those around them in order to get them to leave. Once they do, he appoints his people into those positions so that he could have his way. We knew that was VC Colom's intention with our office as well.

My decision to leave the campus after almost 9 years came shortly after Heather Kretz met with the Chancellor in early January to discuss her concerns. As seen in the Chancellor's blog, in his campus-wide email, and at the Chancellor's Conversation in January, the Chancellor has chosen to support Albert Colom because he believes that VC Colom can help him reach his enrollment goals. It was a difficult decision to leave, however, I could not work under someone who would treat people the way he treated Heather Kretz and many others over the years. Heather has been the backbone of our Admissions Office and it is because of her that we have continued to meet campus recruitment goals. I cannot and will not stand around to watch a beloved campus leader be treated the way VC Colom has treated her. I'm also leaving the university because I do not believe that VC Colom has the best interest of the campus in mind. There are many initiatives that he is creating but he has not taken the time to listen to or connect with content experts on campus before implementing. I am also leaving because he has created a toxic work environment in our office by shifting people and roles around unnecessarily and without thought or reason. **Lastly, as someone who recruits multicultural students to campus, I do not have faith in the fact that I would be able to continue to recruit authentically to UWEC under VC Colom's leadership.**

I've built many relationships and partnerships over the years and am often the point person for multicultural students wanting to attend the university, so the decision to leave my position was a difficult one - but the right one. I love UW-Eau Claire and the students and will always be a Blugold at heart.

2/16/2020

This provides a more detailed explanation for my comment in red in my original statement:

VC Colom never had the best interest of the students or the campus in mind. As the lead for multicultural student recruitment, I was not consulted on any initiatives that directly affected recruiting students of color. VC Colom did not take the time to learn about the institution, the needs of the current students, or consider the factors for why students (especially students of color) would choose to attend or not attend UWEC. He was making decisions without rationale. It seemed as though he was more interested in

legacy building by overlaying general recruitment templates for use at UWEC. This was often without input from key stakeholders and content experts. When we pressed for more details and explanations for why decisions were made, VC Colom would not provide it but we had to carry it through anyways.

For example: MN High School Partnerships

These were partnerships that would be between UWEC and four High Schools in MN that had high multicultural student populations. These partnerships would guarantee academic support, college programming, access to summer pre-college camps at UWEC, and guaranteed scholarships for those HS students once they attended campus. Although the partnerships were something I had wanted to start for a while, I was concerned about the high schools that were selected. UWEC had never had a strong applicant pool from 3 out of those 4 high schools and we end up denying a lot of those students due to academics; and/or we weren't able to yield those students even after admitting them. In addition, those high schools were already oversaturated by college-access organizations such as College possible, Upward Bound, and Project Success. Lastly, many of the first-generation, low-income, multicultural high school students from those high schools would lose a great deal of MN grants by attending a WI college. This information is well-known if you would look at the financial aid data. There was no way that our "guaranteed scholarships" would have been able to take the place of those MN grants for many students. Because of this, I recommended four other high schools that would be better suited for the partnership and provided data for it, however, that information was ignored. To be clear, I was excited about new ideas for recruiting students of color and always excited about innovative strategies. However, the specific decisions that were made and the way the decisions were made got to the point where I did not feel that I could ethically and authentically carry this recruitment plan through as it did not take into consideration the needs of those multicultural high school students.