THE WEST VIRGINIA PUBLIC EMPLOYEES GRIEVANCE BOARD

MENGYANG LI,

Grievant,

v.

Docket No. 2018-0654-SU

SHEPHERD UNIVERSITY,

Respondent.

DISMISSAL ORDER

Grievant, Mengyang Li, is employed by Respondent, Shepherd University. On

October 30, 2017, Grievant filed this grievance against Respondent stating:

On October 12, 2017, Shepherd University continued a continuing practice of violating and misinterpreting the minimum qualifications for promotion to professor published in the Faculty Handbook, and for the first time responded to the specifically identified incident of harassment and discrimination in my promotion application process that I reported in my May 17 and September 18, 2017 letters (attached Documents 3 and 1). The list of the specific statues (sic), policies and agreements violated is in the attached sheets.

For relief, Grievant seeks "[t]o right the wrong of denying my promotion caused

by the misinterpretation of the minimum qualifications for promotion to Professor in the

Faculty Handbook. To provide a respectful, fair, effective and hopefully friendly work

environment."

Following the level one hearings held on December 1, 2017, December 8, 2017, and December 15, 2017, a level one decision was rendered on January 12, 2018, denying the grievance. Grievant appealed to level two on January 26, 2018. A mediation session was held and an order issued therefrom on April 18, 2018. Grievant appealed to level three of the grievance process on May 4, 2018. In his appeal to level

three, Grievant made new claims of harassment and discrimination, and claimed that in denying his second application for promotion to Professor on April 23, 2018, Respondent had again misinterpreted the minimum qualifications for promotion. Grievant's claim based on the April 23, 2018, denial of his application for promotion to professor, and any related allegations of harassment and discrimination, were transferred from the current action into a new action styled *Mengyang Li v. Shepherd University*, Docket No. 2018-1475-SU, and will not be addressed further herein. Level three hearings were held on October 4, 2018, October 5, 2018, and October 18, 2018, before the undersigned at Shepherd University and at the Grievance Board's Westover, West Virginia office. Grievant appeared in person and pro se.¹ Respondent was represented by its General Counsel, K. Alan Perdue. This matter became mature for decision on December 17, 2018, upon final receipt of each party's written Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law.

Synopsis

Grievant is employed as an Associate Professor by Respondent, Shepherd University. In his level one grievance, Grievant alleges that Respondent misinterpreted the minimum qualifications for promotion to Professor when it denied his application for promotion on May 3, 2017, and by then engaging in a continuing practice of misinterpreting the criteria for promotion in letters it sent him up through October 12, 2017, rendering his October 30, 2018, grievance filing timely. Grievant alleges that Respondent replied to his concern of harassment and discrimination in his promotion

¹"*Pro se*" is translated from Latin as "for oneself" and in this context means one who represents oneself in a hearing without a lawyer or other representative. BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY, 8th Edition, 2004 Thompson/West, page 1258.

application process for the first time on October 12, 2017, thus rendering his October 30, 2017, filing thereon timely. Grievant made new allegations of harassment and discrimination in his level three appeal filed on May 4, 2018. At level one, Respondent made an oral motion to dismiss the grievance due to untimeliness and renewed that motion during the level three hearing. Respondent proved by a preponderance of the evidence that the grievance was filed untimely. Grievant failed to prove that he had a proper basis to excuse his untimely filing. Accordingly, the grievance is dismissed.

The following Findings of Fact are based upon a complete and thorough review of the record created in this grievance:

Findings of Fact

1. Grievant is employed as an Associate Professor by Respondent, Shepherd University (Shepherd) in the Department of Chemistry at the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics.

2. Respondent hired Grievant as a tenure-track Assistant Professor in 2008.

Grievant received tenure with his promotion to Associate Professor in April
2012. (Respondent's Exhibit 1)

4. Grievant was notified of this promotion via letter dated April 20, 2012, which stated in part "[n]ewly-promoted Associate Professors should be mindful of the specific standards for promotion to Professor at Shepherd. Any review of an application for further promotion will focus on peer-reviewed publications and other professional development while in the rank of Associate Professor." (Respondent's Exhibit 1)

5. The Faculty Handbook for 2016-2017 notifies faculty of the right to file a grievance and the deadlines involved. (Grievant's Exhibit 2)

6. In the fall of 2016, Grievant applied for promotion to Professor.

7. By letter dated May 3, 2017, Shepherd President Mary Hendrix denied Grievant's application for promotion to Professor, reasoning that "at present you have no refereed publications while in rank, and this remains an impediment to the promotion you seek." (Grievant's Exhibit 10)

8. On May 17, 2017, Grievant sent a letter to President Hendrix acknowledging receipt of her May 3, 2017, letter denying his application for promotion to Professor and disputing Shepherd's interpretation that the Faculty Handbook requires multiple refereed publications while in rank of Associate Professor. (Grievant's Exhibit 19)

9. Grievant's May 17, 2017, letter also alleged that the application process lacked integrity and mentioned a November 2016, meeting with Dr. Robert Warburton (Promotion and Tenure Committee Chair) as evidence thereof. (Grievant's Exhibit 19)

10. On July 10, 2017, President Hendrix sent Grievant a letter responding to his May 17, 2017, letter. President Hendrix reaffirmed the accuracy of Shepherd's denial of his application and its interpretation of the criteria for promotion. President Hendrix did not address Grievant's allegation of harassment and discrimination in the application process. (Grievant's Exhibit 27)

11. In July of 2017, Grievant consulted with an attorney.

12. On September 18, 2017, Grievant sent President Hendrix a letter replying to her July 10, 2017, letter. Grievant expressed concern that President Hendrix's July 10, 2017, letter "**did not address** the reported incidents and actions that led to my serious doubt of Committee Chair Dr. Robert Warburton's fairness and **did not address**

the reported Committee's violation of the Faculty Handbook minimum qualifications". (Grievant's Exhibit 23)

13. On October 12, 2017, K. Alan Perdue, General Counsel for Shepherd, sent Grievant a letter responding to his September 18, 2017, letter. The letter reaffirmed Shepherd's interpretation of the criteria for promotion to Professor and quoted from President Hendrix's July 10, 2017, letter to reiterate that "the University has determined that 'Shepherd's policy on promotion in rank was not misinterpreted during the review of your application." It also addressed Grievant's claims of discrimination and harassment in stating that "[t]he University does not believe that Dr. Warburton acted with either discriminatory intent nor discriminatory animus toward you; does not believe that his assessments of your portfolio were adversely affected by any improper factor, and does not believe that Dr. Warburton holds any improper animus or perspective about you and /or your status as a faculty member." (Grievant's Exhibit 28)

14. In his level three appeal, Grievant for the first time raised new allegations of harassment and discrimination. These alleged incidents were as follows: Dr. Mader was discourteous to Grievant in 2016, when she said "what's up?" to him without looking up from her computer; up through November 2017, Dr. Mader routinely avoided looking at Grievant or saying hello when they passed each other in the hallway; in the Spring of 2017, at the conclusion of his class, Grievant left his notes on the lectern to go to the restroom, only to find upon his return that Dr. Mader had moved them to the edge of the lectern; also in the Spring of 2017, Grievant then began leaving his notes on the edge only to find that Dr. Mader had moved them to a stool near the door even though her class had not yet started; when Grievant approached the Department Chair in 2017,

about the moved notes, he was dismissive; Grievant recently found that Dr. Cole had copied Grievant's notes from a chalkboard without Grievant's permission and posted them online for her students to use; in January of 2018, professors in his department tried unsuccessfully to force Grievant to use only multiple choice questions on his general chemistry course exams; Dr. Nick Martin (Promotion and Tenure Committee member) was not sociable when Grievant passed him in the hall on February 28, 2018; in January of 2018, shortly after his level one hearing in the above styled action, the goggles from the chemistry lab were removed and only later that month did his Department Chair, Dan DiLella, inform him of a policy change requiring all students to bring their own goggles; on March 2, 2018, Dr. Warburton sent Grievant an email cautioning him against compelling colleagues to be "personally interactive" with him if they chose not to be; and that some of the witnesses at the level one hearings in December of 2017, were not truthful. (level three appeal)

15. By March 23, 2018, Grievant was aware of the allegations regarding Dr. Cole disseminating his chalkboard notes. (Respondent's Exhibit 2)

16. In his level three appeal, Grievant acknowledged that he did not raise in his level one grievance the incidents of harassment and discrimination perpetrated by Dr. Mader and Dr. Cole. He gives as an apparent explanation that "Chair DiLella said "Nobody saw these [incidents]. Some people just do not like each other" and that "Dr. Mader's behavior toward me changed for the better after Department Chair DiLella agreed to talk to Dr. Mader." (level three appeal)

17. Respondent moved to dismiss the grievance as untimely at both the level one and level three hearings.

Discussion

Respondent asserts that the grievance was not filed within the time period allowed by W. Va. Code § 6C-2-4 and that it must be dismissed without addressing the claims therein. "[When an] employer seeks to have a grievance dismissed on the basis that it was not timely filed, the employer has the burden of demonstrating such untimely filing by a preponderance of the evidence. Once the employer has demonstrated a grievance has not been timely filed, the employee has the burden of demonstrating a proper basis to excuse his failure to file in a timely manner. Sayre v. Mason County Health Dep't, Docket No. 95-MCHD-435 (Dec. 29, 1995), aff'd, Circuit Court of Mason County, No. 96-C-02 (June 17, 1996). See Ball v. Kanawha County Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 94-20-384 (Mar. 13, 1995); Woods v. Fairmont State College, Docket No. 93-BOD-157 (Jan. 31, 1994); Jack v. W. Va. Div. of Human Serv., Docket No. 90-DHS-524 (May 14, 1991)." Higginbotham v. Dep't of Pub. Safety, Docket No. 97-DPS-018 (Mar. 31, 1997). "If proven, an untimely filing will defeat a grievance, in which case the merits of the case need not be addressed. Lynch v. W. Va. Dep't of Transp., Docket No. 97-DOH-060 (July 16, 1997)." Carnes v. Raleigh County Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 01-41-351 (Nov. 13, 2001).

While the burden is on Respondent to prove the grievance was filed untimely, the code requires that "[a]ny assertion that the filing of the grievance at level one was untimely shall be made at or before level two." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-3(c)(1). Respondent did assert multiple times during the level one hearing that the grievance

was filed untimely. Respondent renewed its motion to dismiss during the level three hearing and in its proposed findings of fact and conclusions of law.

Respondent contends that the grievance was filed untimely because Grievant knew his application was denied by the time he sent his May 17, 2017, letter to President Hendrix contesting the basis for the denial. Yet Grievant did not file his grievance thereon until October 30, 2017. Grievant also knew of the incident between he and Dr. Warburton in November of 2016, but did not grieve it until October 30, 2017. Grievant cited numerous allegations of harassment and discrimination, which he alleged occurred between 2016 and March 23, 2018. Grievant failed to grieve these new incidents until he filed his level three appeal on May 4, 2018. An employee is required to "file a grievance within the time limits specified in this article." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-3(a)(1). The Code further sets forth the time limits for filing a grievance as follows:

Within fifteen days following the occurrence of the event upon which the grievance is based, or within fifteen days of the date upon which the event became known to the employee, or within fifteen days of the most recent occurrence of a continuing practice giving rise to a grievance, an employee may file a written grievance with the chief administrator stating the nature of the grievance and the relief requested and request either a conference or a hearing

W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-4(a)(1).

"Days' means working days exclusive of Saturday, Sunday, official holidays and any day in which the employee's workplace is legally closed under the authority of the chief administrator due to weather or other cause provided for by statute, rule, policy or practice." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-2(c). In addition, the time limits are extended when a grievant has "approved leave from employment." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-4(a)(2).

The time period for filing a grievance ordinarily begins to run when the employee is "unequivocally notified of the decision being challenged." *Harvey v. W. Va. Bureau of Empl. Programs*, Docket No. 96-BEP-484 (Mar. 6, 1998); *Whalen v. Mason County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 97-26-234 (Feb. 27, 1998). Grievant knew of the incidents raised in his level one grievance well beyond fifteen working days prior to filing the grievance. Grievant was aware of the new incidents he included in his level three appeal well beyond fifteen working days prior to filing these proven the grievance. Respondent has proven Grievant's filing was untimely.

Grievant now has the burden of proving a proper basis to excuse his failure to file in a timely manner. Grievant contends that Respondent's misinterpretation of the minimum qualifications for promotion to Professor was a continuing practice that began when Respondent denied his application on May 3, 2017, and continued through October 12, 2017, when Respondent mailed the last of its responsive letters to Grievant reiterating its interpretation. Grievant further contends that Respondent first addressed his concerns about harassment and discrimination in the promotion application process through its October 12, 2017, letter. As such, Grievant argues that the events upon which his level one grievance is based continued until October 12, 2017.

Respondent counters that Shepherd denied Grievant's application through its May 3, 2017, letter and that Grievant acknowledged receipt of this denial when he responded on May 17, 2017. Respondent contends that its ongoing conversation with Grievant regarding the denial of his application does not constitute a continuing practice. "A single act that causes continuing damage does not convert an otherwise isolated act into a continuing practice. *Spahr v. Preston Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, 182 W. Va.

726, 729, 391 S.E.2d 739, 742 (1990)" *Straley v. Putnam Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No 2014-0314-PutED (July 28, 2014), *aff'd*, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 15-1207 (Nov. 16, 2016).

Grievant contends his filing is timely because Shepherd engaged in a continuing practice of violating and misinterpreting the minimum gualifications of promotion to professor, the most recent of which was Respondent's October 12, 2017, letter reaffirming its interpretation of its May 3, 2017, denial of Grievant's application for promotion. "[W]hen a grievant challenges a ... determination which was made in the past . . . this 'can only be classified as a continuing damage arising from the alleged wrongful act which occurred in [the past]. Continuing damage cannot be converted into a continuing practice giving rise to a timely grievance pursuant to CODE § 29-6A-4(a). See, Spahr v. Preston Co. Bd. of Educ., [182 W. Va. 726,] 391 S.E.2d 739 (1990).' Nutter v. W. Va. Dep't of Health and Human Resources, Docket No. 94-HHR-630 (Mar. 23, 1995). See also Jones v. Div. of Rehabilitation Services, Docket No. 00-RS-046 (June 22, 2000)." Young v. Div. of Corr., Docket No. 01-CORR-059 (July 10, 2001). Grievant only grieves Respondent's interpretation of the Faculty Handbook because Respondent denied his application. As such, the grievable event is the denial of Grievant's application.

As for his claim regarding harassment and discrimination in the promotion application process, Grievant relies on an incident from November of 2016, to back this claim. In contending that Respondent's October 12, 2017, letter was the first time Respondent addressed the allegations of harassment and discrimination in the promotion process, Grievant implies that the grievable event was Respondent's October

12, 2017, denial of his allegation rather than the alleged incident in November of 2016. Grievant cites no authority for this assertion. Neither does he present any authority for the proposition that Respondent was required to respond to his allegations.

Grievant testified that he consulted with an attorney in July of 2017, implying that he was better able to then understand the legal issues. "[T]he date a Grievant finds out an event or continuing practice was illegal is not the date for determining whether his grievance is timely filed. Instead, if he knows of the event or practice, he must file within fifteen days of the event or occurrence of the practice. Harris v. Lincoln County Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 89-22-49 (Mar. 23, 1989). See also Buck v. Wood County Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 96-54-325 (Feb. 28, 1997)." Lynch v. Dep't of Transp., Docket No. 97-DOH-060 (July 16, 1997) aff'd, Kanawha Co. Cir. Ct. Docket No. 97-AA-110 (Jan. 21, 1999). Grievant also implies that he waited until his level three appeal to include the new incidents of harassment because his Department Chair, Dan DiLella, told him that nobody saw the incidents. "[A] grievant may not fail to reasonably investigate a grievable event and then, at a later time, claim that he or she did not know the underlying circumstances of the grievable event." Bailey v. McDowell Cnty. Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 07-33-399 (Nov. 24, 2008). See also Goodwin v. Monongalia County Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 00-30-163 (Sept. 25, 2000), aff'd, Kanawha Cnty. Cir. Ct. Civil Action No. 00-AA-168 (Aug. 12, 2003), appeal refused, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 032841 (Apr. 1, 2004). "[A]s a general rule, ignorance of the law. . . will not suffice to keep a claim alive." Reeves v. Wood Cnty. Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 91-54-337 (Dec. 30, 1991); Mills v. Wayne Cnty. Bd. of Educ., Docket No. 05-50-451 (May 12, 2006), aff'd, Kanawha Cnty. Cir. Ct. Civil Action No. 06-AA-92 (Jun. 16, 2009), appeal refused,

W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 081693 (Dec. 29, 2008). The evidence shows that Grievant was by March 23, 2018, aware of all the new incidents of alleged harassment and discrimination, including the most recent incident where Dr. Cole allegedly copied and disseminated his chalkboard notes.

On May 17, 2017, Grievant replied to President Hendrix's May 3, 2017, letter denying his promotion to Professor. Grievant therefore knew by May 17, 2017, that he had been denied promotion to Professor. Grievant only cites one incident of harassment and discrimination in the promotion application process, which he alleges occurred in November of 2016. By March 23, 2018, Grievant knew of all the new allegations of harassment and discrimination cited in his level three appeal. Respondent's denial of Grievant's application was a single act taken by Respondent on May 3, 2017. Respondent was not required to respond to any of Grievant's letters. Respondent's civility in replying to Grievant's letter to reaffirm its interpretation of the standard for promotion and denial of his application does not act to toll the time period for filing this grievance.

Respondent has proven by a preponderance of the evidence that the grievance was filed untimely. The Grievant has not proven a proper basis to excuse his untimely filing nor has he proven that his grievance contains any claim that is a continuing violation. As such, the undersigned need not address the merits of this grievance. This grievance is hereby dismissed.

The following Conclusions of Law support the decision reached.

Conclusions of Law

1. "[When an] employer seeks to have a grievance dismissed on the basis that it was not timely filed, the employer has the burden of demonstrating such untimely filing by a preponderance of the evidence. Once the employer has demonstrated a grievance has not been timely filed, the employee has the burden of demonstrating a proper basis to excuse his failure to file in a timely manner. *Sayre v. Mason County Health Dep't*, Docket No. 95-MCHD-435 (Dec. 29, 1995), *aff'd*, Circuit Court of Mason County, No. 96-C-02 (June 17, 1996). *See Ball v. Kanawha County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 94-20-384 (Mar. 13, 1995); *Woods v. Fairmont State College*, Docket No. 93-BOD-157 (Jan. 31, 1994); *Jack v. W. Va. Div. of Human Serv.*, Docket No. 97-DPS-018 (Mar. 31, 1997).

2. "Any assertion that the filing of the grievance at level one was untimely shall be made at or before level two." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-3(c)(1).

3. An employee is required to "file a grievance within the time limits specified in this article." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-3(a)(1). The Code further sets forth the time limits for filing a grievance as follows:

Within fifteen days following the occurrence of the event upon which the grievance is based, or within fifteen days of the date upon which the event became known to the employee, or within fifteen days of the most recent occurrence of a continuing practice giving rise to a grievance, an employee may file a written grievance with the chief administrator stating the nature of the grievance and the relief requested and request either a conference or a hearing.

W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-4(a)(1).

"Days' means working days exclusive of Saturday, Sunday, official holidays and any day in which the employee's workplace is legally closed under the authority of the chief administrator due to weather or other cause provided for by statute, rule, policy or practice." W. Va. Code § 6C-2-2(c). In addition, the time limits are extended when a grievant has "approved leave from employment." W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-4(a)(2).

4. The time period for filing a grievance ordinarily begins to run when the employee is "unequivocally notified of the decision being challenged." *Harvey v. W. Va. Bureau of Empl Programs,* Docket No. 96-BEP-484 (Mar. 6, 1998); *Goodwin v. Div. of Highways*, Docket No. 2011-0604-DOT (Mar. 4, 2011); *Straley v. Putnam Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 2017-0314-PutED (July 28, 2014), *aff'd*, Kanawha Cnty. Cir. Ct. Civil Action No. 14-AA-91 (Nov. 16, 2015), *aff'd*, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 15-1207 (Nov. 16, 2016).

5. "A single act that causes continuing damage does not convert an otherwise isolated act into a continuing practice. *Spahr v. Preston Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, 182 W. Va. 726, 729, 391 S.E.2d 739, 742 (1990)" *Straley v. Putnam Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No 2014-0314-PutED (July 28, 2014), *aff'd*, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 15-1207 (Nov. 16, 2016).

6. "[T]he date a Grievant finds out an event or continuing practice was illegal is not the date for determining whether his grievance is timely filed. Instead, if he knows of the event or practice, he must file within fifteen days of the event or occurrence of the practice. *Harris v. Lincoln County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 89-22-49 (Mar. 23, 1989). *See also Buck v. Wood County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 96-54-325 (Feb. 28, 1997)." *Lynch v. Dep't of Transp.*, Docket No. 97-DOH-060 (July 16, 1997) *aff'd*, Kanawha Co.

Cir. Ct. Docket No. 97-AA-110 (Jan. 21, 1999). "[A] grievant may not fail to reasonably investigate a grievable event and then, at a later time, claim that he or she did not know the underlying circumstances of the grievable event." *Bailey v. McDowell Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 07-33-399 (Nov. 24, 2008). *See also Goodwin v. Monongalia County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 00-30-163 (Sept. 25, 2000), *aff'd*, Kanawha Cnty. Cir. Ct. Civil Action No. 00-AA-168 (Aug. 12, 2003), *appeal refused*, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 032841 (Apr. 1, 2004). "[A]s a general rule, ignorance of the law. . .will not suffice to keep a claim alive." *Reeves v. Wood Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 91-54-337 (Dec. 30, 1991); *Mills v. Wayne Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 05-50-451 (May 12, 2006), *aff'd*, Kanawha Cnty. Cir. Ct. Civil Action No. 06-AA-92 (Jun. 16, 2009), *appeal refused*, W.Va. Sup. Ct. App. Docket No. 081693 (Dec. 29, 2008).

8. "If proven, an untimely filing will defeat a grievance, in which case the merits of the case need not be addressed. *Lynch v. W. Va. Dep't of Transp.*, Docket No. 97-DOH-060 (July 16, 1997)." *Carnes v. Raleigh County Bd. of Educ.*, Docket No. 01-41-351 (Nov. 13, 2001).

9. Respondent has proven by a preponderance of evidence that Grievant did not timely file his grievance.

10. Grievant has not proven by a preponderance of evidence that he had a proper basis to excuse his untimely filing.

Accordingly, the grievance is DISMISSED.

Any party may appeal this Dismissal Order to the Circuit Court of Kanawha County. Any such appeal must be filed within thirty (30) days of receipt of this Dismissal Order. See W. VA. CODE § 6C-2-5. Neither the West Virginia Public Employees

Grievance Board nor any of its administrative law judges is a party to such appeal and should not be so named. However, the appealing party is required by W. VA. CODE § 29A-5-4(b) to serve a copy of the appeal petition upon the Grievance Board. The civil action number should be included so that the certified record can be properly filed with the circuit court. *See also* W. VA. CODE ST. R. § 156-1-6.20 (2018).

DATE: January 29, 2019

Joshua S. Fraenkel Administrative Law Judge