

Was Spielvogel's 'just cause' firing really just?

I was shocked.

After less than 90 days and an extensive, expensive (\$40,000) search by an outside firm, Lake Michigan College President Jennifer Spielvogel, only the second female president in the college's history, was abruptly suspended, then fired.

What went wrong?

The early story was that she spent too much – \$20,625 – less than the cost of the new commercial dishwasher the college purchased for its wine and culinary education center.

Surely there was more.

But the “just cause” hearing wasn't much more enlightening.

According to LMC, when board Chairwoman Mary Jo Tomasini learned Spielvogel failed to turn in expense reports for two consecutive months, she launched an “inquiry.”

Why a late expense report should rise to the level of board scrutiny isn't clear.

And why Tomasini would launch an “inquiry” when she could have simply spoken to Spielvogel is also not clear.

The complaints against Spielvogel include:

- Spending \$1,250 from her discretionary fund for Kenny Chesney tickets, which Spielvogel contends she purchased at an LMC charity auction to raise money for student scholarships.

- Spending on office refurbishment, and an inauguration, both of which Spielvogel believed the

college had earmarked funds for.

- Buying an academic robe and medallion. Spielvogel agreed to reimburse LMC for the medallion.

The board complained that Spielvogel attended an academic conference as an invited speaker for which LMC disputed travel and time expenses, even though such opportunities are widely sought as reputation-enhancers for both speaker and school.

And the board charged Spielvogel with contributing to a hostile work environment in part by reassigning existing staff or possibly replacing them, something incoming leaders do routinely.

What's puzzling is that LMC could have refused to reimburse (and in some instances, did), coached and counseled, cautioned Spielvogel and moved on to more substantive issues.

Instead they fired her. After only 90 days.

At the “just cause” hearing, the board portrayed a grandiose and imperial president on a shopping spree. This impression was reinforced by a mannequin prominently displayed in academic robe and medallion. Though Spielvogel agreed to pay for the medallion, it seemed to provoke the particular ire of Tomasini.

The HP reported that “while medallions are often worn by high-ranking university and college officials, Tomasini said ‘no former LMC presidents have done so.’”

In fact they have.

If Tomasini strolls down LMC's hall, she'll encounter James L. Lehman (1967-1978) photographed in his robe (not unlike the one that helped get Spiel-

vogel fired), wearing a medallion that was presented on LMC's 25th anniversary. This chain medallion resides in the college's archives.

Spielvogel believes the real story is the compliance issues she uncovered. Her complaint alleges that because LMC's director of financial aid has been on medical leave since August 2015, Spielvogel retained two experts to evaluate both the Registrar's Office and the Financial Aid department. Their assessment found 15 compliance issues, some rated “serious, requiring immediate attention.” Plus numerous training and software issues (18 pages worth).

Spielvogel alleges at least one compliance issue has been a problem since 2011.

According to LMC lawyers, while there are some compliance issues, there is no information to suggest fraud. And LMC says 15 consecutive years of A-133 audits have been clean.

Former president (now interim president) Bob Harrison was hired to ease Spielvogel's transition. Did he do his job? LMC contends Spielvogel pretty much ignored him. Yet she did cancel the inauguration, the redecorating, paid for the medallion and went to Lansing with him.

Has anyone heard of another college president hustled out after only 90 days? Would they have hustled out a man as quickly?

When LMC forced out Randall Miller (for reasons never disclosed) the deal was they'd pay his full salary until he found a new job. Amazingly, he never did.

Which means for about two years, LMC paid *TWO presidents' salaries simultaneously for*

only ONE working president, Bob Harrison.

No salary, though, for Spielvogel. Terminating her for “just cause” terminated her salary. Plus the board voted to go after her for the \$20,625, which includes \$365.40 for unapproved staff time on the canceled inauguration.

Good luck.

If the college thought that by firing her for just cause, it could avoid paying out her contract, she returned the favor by suing for lost past and future wages, fringe benefits, compensatory damages, reinstatement and attorney fees. In federal court.

Lost in the drama about medallions and robes are Spielvogel's ideas for LMC and how she planned to implement them. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Michigan and she's described as a nationally recognized “expert in student achievement and accountability metrics,” which might have been helpful since LMC faces challenges, including lagging enrollment.

Maybe we'll find out the real story when LMC responds to Spielvogel's complaint.

Since most lawsuits are settled, the expectation is that this one will, too. But at what cost? LMC spent more than \$40,000 to find Spielvogel. And probably a great deal more to fire her.

Its legal defense costs, it says, are covered by insurance, less the deductible.

LMC recently announced a tuition hike. And amazingly, appears poised to float a millage increase.

Hiring, firing, and now taxing merrily along.

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