

UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson Annual Report 2014

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The 2013-2014 academic year marks my fourth as UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson. I am grateful to the Provost Hackett, Vice Provost Medeiros, and Peggy Ward-Smith, Chair of the Faculty Senate, and the Senate itself for supporting my role. This report is first, to serve as the annual record of the activities of the ombuds office, and second, to describe the primary issues raised and make recommendations for improvement.

2013-2014 Ombuds Activities

Assisting visitors

This year I had a lighter visitor “load” than last year, assisting 14 faculty representing seven different college/schools/other administrative divisions (compared to 24 faculty last year, from eight divisions). Interactions included email exchanges, telephone and face-to-face meetings, reviewing documents, and additional time necessary for researching cases, referrals, or conferring with other professionals when appropriate. Face-to-face meetings averaged about an hour and a quarter each, and some visitors requested multiple meetings.

Promoting ombuds activities

The main focus of ombuds promotions this year was on the following:

- Updates via the UMatters e-newsletter.
- Working with University Communications:
 - UMatters did a feature story on my office in March.
 - University Communications has completed a new Ombudsperson brochure. It will be distributed to offices around the campus by fall 2014.
- Worked jointly with Peggy Ward-Smith, Chair of the Faculty Senate and FaCET director, and Karen Brookings, Training Specialist for UMKC HR to develop training programs focused on a healthy, respectful workplace. In conjunction with Larry Bunce of UMKC Institutional Research, we conducted a survey to determine the most desired training programs and format. We plan on beginning training first thing in the fall semester.

Education and networking

The nature of ombuds work requires interaction with other professionals and ongoing education. I regularly network with a fellow local ombudsperson, attended the Academic Ombudsperson Conference and plan to continue these contacts in the upcoming academic year.

I have continued to meet and coordinate with UMKC staff members, including Drs. Arnold Abels, (UMKC Counseling, Health and Testing Center) and Mary Kay Kistardt (UMKC Mediation Services).

Visitors' Issues

While personal identities and affiliations of visitors and other specifics of ombuds visits are confidential, the following themes were raised most often. Readers of past annual reports will recognize these from previous years. Because these themes represent only 14 visitors, they may not reflect pervasive problems. However, particularly since they are consistent with previous years and typical of interpersonal and managerial relationships in organizations, they should be noted.

- Most visitors' issues relate to conflicts and communication problems with faculty supervisors, particularly regarding decisions about performance evaluations, promotion and tenure review, or the five-year post-tenure review process. This continues to be the most frequently presented category in the last four years.
- Difficult relationships with colleagues also showed itself as an issue. Often this related to a lack of communication and/or under-developed communication skills.

Suggested University/School/Department/Faculty Responses

Appeals process for faculty performance reviews

The Faculty Senate Chair has informed me that, based on input from the ombuds office, a performance appraisal appeals process has now been established in which a faculty member may appeal to his/her dean if dissatisfied with their performance evaluation. More information on this policy can be obtained through the Provost's office.

Past recommendations

In previous years, I have made the following recommendations in more detail. I continue to see them as relevant and important in improving work life for UMKC faculty.

- An e-communication vehicle should be developed for faculty to share news, events, and provide a forum for discussion of issues. This would be helpful in explaining new policies, gaining faculty input, and ensuring rumors are controlled.
- I have recommended department chair and faculty supervisor training in past reports. Although not cost-free in time and money, high-quality, requiring training of all supervisory faculty would save time and money in the long run and make academic life at UMKC less stressful and more efficient for all. Topics such as conflict management, communication, performance management, and legal issues would all be appropriate.
- Similarly, training in conflict management and communication skills available to all faculty would enhance our working environment. Hopefully, some of this will be covered by the Ombuds/HR/Faculty Senate training sessions currently in design.
- More precise policies for temporary, part-time employees would enhance the work life of this ever-growing contingent of our faculty. Such policies should be written to allow for sufficient inter-school variation.

- All Schools/College/Departments should ensure their bylaws and policies are clear, updated, and complete. Although time-consuming to develop, they would smooth academic operations and decrease conflicts.
- Consider expansion of alternative-dispute resolution options. Faculty are probably well-served currently with the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services, but students have few options.

Conclusion

Once again I extend my thanks for your confidence in me and your support of my efforts. I enjoy my work as UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson. I welcome your comments, questions, or service requests.