

UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson Annual Report 2015

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The 2014-2015 academic year marks my fifth as UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson. I am grateful to the Provost Hackett, Interim Provost Cindy Pemberton, 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.

2014-2015 Ombuds Activities

Assisting visitors

This year, I was on developmental leave in the spring semester and thus saw ombuds visitors only in the summer and fall. During this time, 9 faculty representing 5 different college/schools/other administrative divisions consulted with me about work-related issues. As is the case in most years, 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 several visitors requested multiple meetings. Prior year counts are:

2013-2014: 13 visitors, 7 units

2012-2013: 24 visitors, 9 units

2011-2012: 14 visitors, 6 units

2010-2011: 6 visitors, 5 units

Promoting ombuds activities

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

- Via the UMMatters e-newsletter, providing ombuds-related articles to faculty concerning such topics as burnout, dealing with negative coworkers, dealing with conflict, and working in teams.
- Thanks to University Communications, a new brochure was created describing the faculty ombudsperson services and distributed to offices.
- After conducting a survey of faculty to determine relevant topics, I worked jointly with Peggy Ward-Smith, Chair of the Faculty Senate and FaCET director, and Karen Brookings, Training Specialist for UMKC HR, to develop several training programs. The purposes of these trainings were to contribute to a respectful, civil work environment as well as promote the ombuds function. Unfortunately, our attendance was quite low, and the final session of the fall semester was cancelled.

Education and networking

I continue to meet regularly with a fellow ombudsperson working in a local health care agency. I have also been asked to chair the Academy of Management's Ombudsperson Committee, which seeks to assist

Academy members in dealing with concerns related to the association and its other members. The Academy of Management is the premier academic association for scholars and teachers in the management field and boasts about 15,000 members. Due to my spring developmental leave and a sooner-than-expected move, I was unable to attend any conferences or training sessions this year.

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 a small number of people, 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.

Recommendations for University/School/Department/Faculty Responses

Recommendation: Please respond to email!

A frequent communication problem, particularly with visitors' department chairs, deans, and other "higher-ups" was unanswered emails. My own personal experience indicates this is a common problem. Receivers of email often don't realize the email's writer had a definite purpose, intent, and need in composing and sending the email. When they go unanswered, that need is unmet and the faculty member may be unable to fulfill his/her responsibilities properly. More often, the faculty feels disrespected and unappreciated.

Emails pile up in everyone's e-inboxes, and there are many resources in technology as well as lots of tips available online and elsewhere for how to deal with massive numbers of messages. I would encourage everyone to find some "tricks" that work for you in managing emails. But unless a faculty member's emails are truly abusive or unreasonable, the most important point is ***emails should at least be acknowledged in a timely manner that they have been received, and the sender assured a response will come when the receiver is able.*** Just doing this would make many supervisory-faculty relationships smoother and more collegial.

Past recommendations

As in previous years, I see the following issues as pervasive, relevant and important in improving work life for UMKC faculty:

- A **faculty-focused e-communication vehicle** should be developed should be developed 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.
- **Department chairs and other faculty supervisors should receive full, ongoing supervisory training.** Although not cost-free in time or money, high-quality supervisory training required for all supervising faculty would save time and money in the long run and make academic life at UMKC less stressful and more efficient. Topics such as conflict management, communication, performance management, and legal workplace issues would all be appropriate.
- Similarly, **training in conflict management and communication skills available to all faculty** would enhance our working environment.
- A continuing need is for **all Schools/College/Departments to 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. Further, a Staff Ombudsperson using the same model as the UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson (part-time appointment for a regular full-time UMKC employee, with a workload reduction and small stipend) should be considered. The Faculty and Staff ombudspersons could “pitch hit” for each other during vacations and other extended absences, which would have provide faculty with ombuds services during my leave.

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.