

UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson Annual Report 2013

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The 2012-2013 academic year marks my third as UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson. I am grateful to the Provost Hackett, Vice Provost Medeiros, and the Faculty Senate for supporting my role so heartily.

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.

2012-2013 Ombuds Activities

Assisting visitors

This year I assisted 24 visitors, representing eight different college/schools/other administrative divisions. This is a 71% increase in visitors from last year (14). 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 most visitors requested multiple meetings.

Promoting ombuds activities

In the fall, I sent an email to all department chairs offering to conduct a short presentation about my services at their faculty meetings. Only one chair asked for a presentation. In the spring semester, Vice Provost Medeiros sent out a similar invitation, and I was invited to four meetings. While these presentations seem to be helpful in attracting new visitors, for some reason most departments seem uninterested. Thus, I've focused my promotional activities in other directions.

- I have sent several updates via the UMatters e-newsletter.
- I developed a one-page flyer that can be easily emailed, and updated the brochure.
- The biggest commitment of my promotional time has been developing a Blackboard site with resources for faculty, including a set of short Tegrity presentations on techniques to conduct Crucial Conversations, articles on "managing your supervisor," getting along with others, dealing with issues related to performance appraisals, resources for student incivility issues, and helping colleagues cope with the loss of loved ones.
- I worked with Drs. Jeff Traiger and Marita Barkis to coordinate a panel of faculty peers who have successfully dealt with student incivility, presented through FACET.

In the upcoming academic year, a large part of my promotional plan is to coordinate with human resources and faculty departments to assess their training needs related to dispute resolution, and if feasible, develop and deliver appropriate training.

Education and networking

The nature of ombuds work requires interaction with other professional and ongoing education. I regularly network with local ombudspersons, and have made contact with KU faculty ombudspersons, with a plan to meet with them periodically in the upcoming academic year.

I continue to attend the International Ombudsman Association national conference. This provides excellent educational resources as well as additional outlets for networking with other academic ombudspersons.

I have continued to meet and coordinate with UMKC staff members, including Drs. Marita Barkis (UMKC Counseling, Health and Testing Center), Karen Dace (Deputy Chancellor – Diversity, Access and Equity), Mary Kay Kistardt (UMKC Mediation Services), and Jeff Traiger (Assistant Dean of Students).

Charter approval

After two years of effort, the “Charter of the Office of the Faculty Ombudsperson” has been approved by UM legal counsel and signed by the Provost and the Faculty Senate Chair. The brochure, website, and other materials have been appropriately updated.

The notable restriction the charter imposes is that as Faculty Ombudsperson, I am an “agent of notice.” This means that if a visitor reports incidences of sexual harassment or illegal discrimination, I must report this to the Division of Diversity, Access, and Equity. This restriction in confidentiality has caused my membership in the International Ombudsman Association to change from “member” to “associate member.”

Visitors’ Issues

While persons and specifics of ombuds visits are confidential, the following three themes were frequently raised. Readers of past annual reports will note that some have arisen previously. Because these themes represent only 24 visitors, they may not reflect pervasive, recurrent problems. However, particularly since they are consistent with previous years, they should be of concern.

- At least half of all visitors’ issues relate to conflicts and communication problems with faculty supervisors, particularly regarding decisions about performance evaluation. This is the most frequently presented category in the last three years.
- Second in frequency are issues related to policies, lack of policies, and unclear or inconsistent policy interpretation. Although not limited to any one faculty role, this theme was particularly common in “non-regular” faculty visitors.
- Last, but high in importance, are issues related to promotion and tenure and the five-year tenure review process. Visitors report “moving” or unclear performance standards, inconsistent application of regulations, and personal agendas in P&T decisions.

Suggested University/School/Department/Faculty Responses

Appeals process for faculty performance reviews

Currently there are no codified procedures for appealing a performance evaluation that a faculty member believes is inaccurate or unfair. The CRRs allow for the faculty member only to “provide a written response to the evaluation” (CRR 310.015.B.b). There is no provision for appealing to a peer review panel, the dean, or the Provost. From the faculty member’s perspective, having no recourse for an unfair or inaccurate review may result in reduced perceptions of due process and a lack of access to deserved rewards. From the administration’s standpoint, it may increase the number and contentiousness of grievances.

Therefore, I recommend that the Provost’s office and the Faculty Senate begin a process of designing and incorporating an appeals process into the formal performance review system.

Faculty e-communication vehicle

There is a lack internal faculty communication. While UMatters serves an important, broad, public relations function, there is no available vehicle for faculty to share news, events, and discuss issues. A bi-weekly e-newsletter, blog, or listserv aimed at faculty needs would increase knowledge-sharing and allow services like the ombuds function to get the word out efficiently and effectively.

Department chair and faculty supervisor training

Training in academic supervision should be designed and delivered to faculty supervisors (department chairs, etc.). While training is offered through the Provost's office and Human Resources, it has been reported that not all faculty supervisors attend the training. Deans may hold the key: Unless faculty supervisors are required to attend training, they are likely to see it as unimportant.

As I noted in previous reports, the following types of training seem critical:

- Conflict management and communication – how to resolve disagreements and interpersonal conflicts productively; how to proactively intervene before communication breaks down; how to take a problem-solving rather than a disciplinary approach.
- Performance management, including
 - How to determine performance expectations and communicate them to faculty
 - How to provide ongoing performance feedback to faculty throughout the academic year
 - How to conduct performance appraisal interviews effectively
- Deeper and regular (e.g. annual) training in legally sensitive issues, such as harassment, discrimination, etc.

Faculty training

Faculty-supervisor relationships would be enhanced if faculty received training in communication skills and conflict management. It is critical that such training be offered as a benefit and resource to faculty, never as a sanction.

Policies for nontraditional faculty roles

Many individuals are employed at UMKC on a temporary, part-time basis and may not have access to the same support services as full-time faculty. I recommend that University-level policies be developed for these roles beyond those currently found in the CRR. These policies would assure fairness for both the individual and the University but also allow for inter-school variation.

Ensuring currency of governing regulations

Some UMKC college/schools or departments are lacking clear, updated, and complete bylaws and/or policies. This creates frustration for faculty and complicates administrators' work by adding confusion and conflict. Deans and department chairs should encourage faculty to review all policies for relevancy, completeness, accuracy, and currency.

Expansion of Alternative-Dispute Resolution at UMKC

UMKC has "holes" in service availability, particularly for students. While faculty, staff, and students are served by the UMKC Hotline, this is limited to quick answers. Mediation Services assists faculty and staff, but not students. The UMKC Counseling Center is the only function that helps students with complicated problems, but there is a substantial waiting list. Some UMKC schools or programs offer student support, but these don't provide the ability to go beyond

the school for sensitive issues. Ensuring students have tools to resolve issues may increase retention. I suggest UMKC consider this model:

Hire a full-time ombudsperson (staff position) to coordinate all ombuds work for students, staff, and faculty. Since faculty members relate most effectively to peers, part-time faculty ombudspersons in selected Schools (e.g. one from Volker campus, one from Hospital Hill) could be appointed (perhaps at 10% loads). KU's ombuds office utilizes full-time staff positions and two part-time faculty ombuds. This model takes most of the promotional and administrative responsibilities from faculty members and creates a professional ombuds staff to also serve staff and students.

Conclusion

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.