

UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson Annual Report 2012

Presented by Nancy E. Day, Faculty Ombudsperson

Over the last two years as UMKC's Faculty Ombudsperson, I have been well supported by both the Faculty Senate and the Provost's Office, for which I am very grateful. Not only have I enjoyed learning the role of ombudsperson, but I believe it's enhanced my own professional and personal skills.

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. Finally, I discuss the availability of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) functions at UMKC as compared to other institutions and make recommendations.

2011-2012 Ombuds Activities

After my first year's work of setting up the office, promoting the function, training, and networking with relevant UMKC colleagues and other ombudsperson, in 2011-2012 my time has been spent more on providing services to visitors¹ and education. Activities included:

- Assisting 14 visitors, representing six different college/schools/other administrative 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.
- In response to issues raised in 2010-2011, two developmental opportunities for faculty were offered through FACET for the fall 2011 semester:
 - In a session addressing student incivility. Dr. Deborah Smith, Interim Director of FACET, identified an expert who presented an overview workshop. Drs. Jeff Traiger and Marita Barkis and I are currently working on a second session designed to create and provide peer support to faculty dealing with student incivility. We hope to present this in the next academic year.
 - Second, Doranne Hudson, Bloch School Executive in Residence, and I presented a FACET session on "Managing Your Department Chair," designed to teach faculty constructive and effective ways to work with their managers.
- I attended the 2012 national conference of the IAO and presented a half-day workshop on "Managing Up," again in collaboration with Professor Hudson.
- I met and coordinated with UMKC staff members, including
 - Marita Barkis, UMKC Counseling, Health and Testing Center
 - Michael Bates, Director Affirmative Action
 - Karen Dace, Deputy Chancellor – Diversity, Access and Equity

¹ In ombuds work the term "visitors" is preferred to "client."

- Mary Kay Kistardt, UMKC Mediation Services
- Jeff Traiger, Assistant Dean of Students
- I met quarterly with two other ombudspersons in the Kansas City area to discuss issues and techniques, and network.
- I contributed periodic articles to UMatters on issues related to topics of interest to ombuds visitors.
- The brochure and website have been updated as necessary.
- I have continued efforts to gain approval of the UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson Charter (still under review at UM's general counsel's office).

Visitors' Issues

While persons and specific content of ombuds visits are confidential, the following are three general issues frequently raised. Readers of last year's annual ombudsperson report will note that these reflect some of the same issues raised in 2010 – 2011.

- Most problems presented revolve around conflicts and communication problems with faculty supervisors, particularly regarding decisions about performance evaluation. Improved knowledge and skill in effective communication and conflict resolution would help faculty and their supervisors experience better working relationships.
- There is a lack of clear definition of non-traditional faculty roles, such as adjuncts, part-time teaching faculty, and visiting scholars. Although letters of agreement generally exist, they are not always clear in important details about terms and conditions of employment. This is especially concerning given that these individuals often don't have the same rights and responsibilities or the same access to information that other UMKC faculty enjoy.
- Not all departments or units have up-to-date, complete governing regulations or bylaws. This creates frustration, misunderstandings, and unnecessary conflicts. It may be that some units that do have them don't understand their contents, or may not closely follow them.

Suggested University/School/Department/Faculty Responses

Department chair and faculty training

Department chair/faculty supervisor training

Training in academic supervision should be designed and delivered to faculty supervisors (department chairs, etc.). While department chair training is offered through the Provost's office, and broadly through Human Resources, it has been reported that not all department chairs and faculty supervisors attend the training, or take it seriously. It is likely deans hold the key: Unless such training is a required performance expectation, department chairs are less likely to see it as important.

As I noted last year, faculty supervisors seem to be in need of the following types of training:

- Conflict management and communication – how to address and resolve disagreements and interpersonal conflicts productively and collegially; how to proactively intervene when communication starts to break down. Supervisors should be taught that a problem-solving approach is more productive for all parties than a disciplinary approach.
- Performance management, including
 - How to determine performance expectations (including “what” and “how well” things should be done)
 - How to communicate performance expectations 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 also be enhanced if faculty had access to regularly-offered, sound, effective 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

An issue emerging this year is that of unclear “job descriptions” for nontraditional faculty roles. This is concerning, since many of these individuals are employed at UMKC on a temporary, part-time basis, and thus may not have the same access to support services as full-time faculty. Further, sometimes these faculty come from international cultures with very different employment practices, and may be subject to unfair treatment that, while perhaps commonplace in other cultures, is unacceptable at UMKC.

I recommend that University-level policies be developed for these roles. For example, some universities have policies for visiting scholars that dictate the major terms and conditions of their employment (see Stanford’s policy at <http://rph.stanford.edu/9-6.html>). Such policies provide a framework to better assure fairness for both the individual and the University but still allow for variation necessary to accommodate the activities of our diverse schools and departments.

Online training resource for part-time instructors

Further, part-time faculty may be expected to deal with issues above and beyond their teaching contract that may take significant time and emotional energy (e.g. student incivility). Providing a University-level training/resource program for part-time faculty, which could be accomplished online at minimal cost and time commitment, could assist both the part-time faculty and improve student experience. Individuals in these roles make up a large proportion of course coverage in many units, and an online training and reference resource designed for them could increase their performance, productivity, satisfaction with the work, and retention.

Ensuring currency of governing regulations

Not all UMKC college/schools or departments have bylaws and/or policies that are clearly articulated, updated, and communicated to faculty. Some do not seem to cover all issues important to faculty activities. Not only is this

frustrating to faculty, it complicates administrators' work and adds to the level of conflict with which they must deal.

College/schools/departments should ensure necessary policies are in place. If existing bylaws and governing practices have not been recently reviewed, they should be. Deans and department chairs should encourage faculty to review all policies for relevancy, completeness, accuracy, and ensure they are up-to-date and readily available. Depending on the complexity and breadth of the school/college/department, this may be particularly important at departmental levels.

Expansion of Alternative-Dispute Resolution at UMKC

As I indicated last year, my network of other University ombudspersons suggests that UMKC is relatively underserved in alternative dispute resolution services. I am the only person serving faculty, at a quarter-time appointment. If the number of visitors to my office increases, either more faculty ombuds or a longer appointment time may be necessary.

Further, most universities with well-developed ADR programs serve students, staff, and faculty. Currently we may have some "holes" in service availability, particularly for students. While all constituents (faculty, staff, students, external constituents) are served by the UMKC Hotline for isolated questions and concerns, this service is generally (and appropriately) limited to quick answers and short interchanges. Mediation Services serves faculty and staff, but not students. The UMKC Counseling Center is the only function besides the Hotline serving students (as well as faculty and staff). Dr. Barkis, Director of Counseling Services, reports that the Counseling Center has a substantial waiting list, comprised mostly of students. While some UMKC schools or programs offer support to their students, an inability to go beyond one's school for advice in sensitive matters may be insufficient.

Thus, it seems that students in particular may not be fully served. Given that retention improvement is a critical goal for UMKC, having ADR services available to them, particularly ombuds services that help define problems and identify strategies to work through them, may be beneficial in keeping students productive and engaged. It is likely that some waiting for Counseling Center services could be more efficiently and effectively supported through ombuds services. An additional part-time faculty ombuds appointment focused on students should be considered.

Over the long-term, these suggestions might be considered:

- Hiring a full-time ombudsperson designated to address all UMKC internal constituents (students, staff, and faculty). This role is typically found in universities with sophisticated ADR operations.
- Consolidating ADR functions in the University, namely ombudsperson(s), Mediation Services, and perhaps the Hotline. All have the need for confidentiality, and locating them all in one off-site location would facilitate communication among ADR staff and create a confidential, safe environment.

Conclusion

I extend my thanks for your confidence in me and your support of my efforts. I have enjoyed my first term as UMKC Faculty Ombudsperson, and hope to continue into a second term. I welcome your comments, questions, or service requests.