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MU stifles creativity

‘Suck-up’ system hurts top faculty.

By EDDIE ADELSTEIN

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The University of Missouri, rich in tradition, has long treated creative faculty as problem children.



E. Adelstein

This philosophy of killing off faculty with creative thoughts is deeply ingrained. It goes back to 1936, when Barbara McClintock, an enormously creative scientist and our only faculty member who has won a Nobel Prize, was told by the chairman of the botany department that if she married or her mentor were fired, she would be terminated. Under this kind of planned pressure, she left the university. Nothing has actually changed.

Faculty members who file grievances and are unsuccessful in achieving satisfaction have a number of common characteristics. They are generally the most creative and productive members of the faculty. They are often awarded for excellence in teaching. Both of these traits segregate with a high level of integrity, and they are not easily bullied. What they lack is the ability to recognize this system does not value those traits and that success is dictated by a well organized “suck-up” system. Criticism of administration initiates a series of punishments that are predictable and destructive.

Initially, they believe the university takes negative actions simply because it doesn’t understand their creative ideas and actions. They read the rules and regulations and find the rules support them. In disbelief, they find the university ignores these rules and interprets them in self-serving manners. The university lawyers send letters with veiled threats. They are willing to hire outside consultants and spend thousands of dollars to win.

Grievants contact local lawyers only to find, with rare exception, no lawyer in Columbia will vigorously challenge the university. The university usually wins by delaying the process until the grievant runs out of money. Often, they find out late in the legal process that you cannot sue the university except in certain cases. Their research is put on hold. Some never recover. The university puts out campaigns of disinformation,

labeling them as “hotheads.”

In this suck-up environment, the quisling phenomena almost always occur. Some faculty members will always view this as an opportunity to advance politically and will be critical of the grievant, hoping for administrative reward. This is often successful.

The university is working aggressively to punish two of our most productive faculty. Greg Engel, associate professor in the electrical and computer engineering department, has research focuses in pulsed power, plasma physics and energy conversions. He has been successful in the private sector and owns several U.S. patents. It is not surprising he was made principal investigator of a Navy project.

Galen Suppes is a professor of chemical engineering with special interests in soy-based polymers, phase-change material and carbon materials. He has received numerous prestigious national awards and is aggressive in marketing his multiple creative ideas. They were both commanded to turn over their intellectual properties and creative actions to the university. The track record of the university actively marketing and protecting the intellectual property of these individuals is poor.

When Suppes and Engel refused to turn over their research ideas and processes to the university, they received numerous threats generated by the university’s legal department. In the case of Suppes, who had filed a grievance against the university, when it became apparent he might win, they chose to interpret the rules of the grievance process that by suing him they could stop the process. That rule was written expressly to allow the faculty to file a lawsuit when the university failed to act upon the grievance. This is an unprecedented action. Further, Suppes said demands included his rights to patents filed before he joined MU and the rights to intellectual property developed by employees of his company.

Engel received notice from our legal department that if he continued to resist the taking of his role of principal investigator of a \$2 million grant from the Navy regarding his expertise in pulsed power, he might be involved in “criminal intent.”

The taking away of his direct authority of this grant is egregious and incomprehensible. Rob Duncan, head of research development, has insisted the principal investigator role be turned over to his wife, Annie Sobel, who is a physician. Her lack of expertise, as well as her relationship to Duncan, places their position as indefensible. After Engel’s complaints, there was an offer to allow him to work on this project, but not as director.

Of course, the university did its usual tricks of punishment. Engel received threatening letters from his chairman, and they took away an online course he had established and put him in charge of a course with which he had little experience. True to form, a number of his fellow faculty members have censured him for his actions.

I had hoped the university commitment to entrepreneurial efforts, headed by UM President Gary Forsee, would change this culture and the intellectual rights of faculty would be protected. The ability of faculty members to make productive the creative ideas they put forth remains abysmal.

What we really need is new top-down change. We need leaders who are committed to education, service and research. We need the brightest and most open creative minds for these positions. The road map for success has been clearly drawn for this institution in the evaluations by U.S. News. We need to make this a faculty-driven institution. We need to increase faculty, award more tenure, decrease class size, reduce tuition and reward creative thought.

How hard can that be?

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