



Williams, Mara' <mdwilliams@kcstar.com>

responses to your questions

1 message

Martellaro, John <martellaroj@umkc.edu> Fri, Nov 16, 2018 at 9:27 AM
To: "mdwilliams@kcstar.com" <mdwilliams@kcstar.com>,
"mhendricks@kcstar.com" <mhendricks@kcstar.com>

Mike and Mara: Answers to your questions are below. The answers are from Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Barbara A. Bichelmeyer, Ph.D., representing the university.

We know from talking to more than a dozen former students and several former pharmacy school faculty members, plus recordings we obtained and court documents, that UMKC doctoral students from India were doing menial labor -- lawn work, waiting on and busing tables at social events etc. -- for former division chair Ashim Mitra, and that complaints about it were made to the university, in particular to pharmacy school officials.

When did the university become aware of this situation? And to what extent was the university aware that it involved multiple students over many years?

I am aware of only one complaint filed regarding allegations that Dr. Mitra was requiring graduate students to do non-academic work, and that took place before I came to UMKC. As I understand it, the complaint was from Dr. Mukherji, who claimed that Dr. Mitra was pressuring some students to participate in off-campus projects.

The complaint involved work at social events by Indian students participating in a group called Sangam, which celebrates Indian culture. We have no evidence that students were required to do the work.

Records indicate that the Curators forwarded Dr. Mukherji's complaint to the Pharmacy School dean, who forwarded it to the correct avenue for such complaints: the Vice Provost of Faculty Affairs. The complaint was investigated, and the university made repeated efforts to contact students identified by Dr. Mukherji at the time. However, no students substantiated the claims and thus no formal action could be taken.

I do not know of a single student who has complained to UMKC officials that Dr. Mitra required them to do non-academic work.

If the university was aware, why was the situation allowed to continue?

As stated in response to the previous question, the complaint was investigated, but no students substantiated the claims and thus no formal action could be taken. In any situation, it can be difficult to know whether an absence of student complaints indicates that there is not a problem, or that students are reluctant to come forward. When the complaint came forward from Dr. Mukherji, officials at the time tried to reach out to students and received no corroboration. Also, I understand that a number of students have voiced support for Dr. Mitra over time. Because Dr. Mitra is a tenured faculty member, the university would need to have evidence that corroborated Dr. Mukherji's complaint to have taken disciplinary action under the university's regulations at the time that Dr. Mukherji's complaint was investigated.

Why didn't the university do more to stop the behavior?

UMKC, in no uncertain terms, does not tolerate any abuse of students in any way, shape or form. When a report is substantiated, the violator is subject to discipline.

We provide students with a list of their rights, and the resources at their disposal; here is the web page: <https://info.umkc.edu/saem/students/student-conduct/>

Additionally, we helped to develop a Standard of Faculty Conduct for the University of Missouri System that addresses issues of civility and professionalism. That work began in 2015 and was completed in 2017.

Tell us about the 2014 investigation the university did of Ashim Mitra, in which the investigator talked to only one student and in the end warned Mitra to stop having students dog sit. Why wasn't a report written?

Again, the complaint was looked into, repeated efforts were made to contact all students identified by Dr. Mukherji, but no students substantiated the claims, and no formal action could be taken under the university's policies and regulations that were in place at the time.

I am not aware of any admonishment of Dr. Mitra regarding dog-sitting.

What is your response to allegations that UMKC administrators looked the other way when confronted with reports that Mitra was asking students to perform personal chores because of his value to the university as a recipient of government research dollars?

As Provost, I have been dedicated to a culture of accountability, civility and professionalism, and making sure that our faculty are adhering to the highest standards. Faculty asked for that when I first arrived here, and since then I have devoted a great deal of time and attention to this work.

When we become aware of behavior that needs to be addressed from any faculty member we investigate and address it — regardless of title or rank, regardless of how much donor or external funding they bring in. That's been a high priority for me to further that culture of accountability.

When a complaint was filed about Dr. Mitra, we did investigate, as detailed above.

We encourage students to report any form of mistreatment by faculty. When we receive those reports we take timely action on them. We can't discuss the particulars of any investigation or process because we don't want to prejudge or prejudice them and because those are student and personnel matters that deserve to be treated with privacy until and if some outcome or public announcement is made. But we want to emphasize that when any form of mistreatment of students is substantiated, disciplinary action is taken.