

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Office of the Chief Information Officer

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December 31, 2012

Mr. Lewis T. (Tom) Morelock
Executive Director
State Universities Civil Service System (SUCSS)
1717 Philo Road, Suite 24
Urbana, IL 61802-6099

Dear Mr. Morelock:

I am writing to you today to provide you and the other members of the SUCSS board with what I hope you will find compelling reasons why it would cause significant harm to our institution's ability to fulfill its academic mission if the exemption authority for ruling on requests to fill a position as an academic professional was removed from the campus Office of Academic Human Resources and transferred to SUCSS.

As CIO, I have campus leadership responsibilities for IT strategic planning, and for helping create and deliver both a cutting edge IT infrastructure and state-of-the-art services to run on that infrastructure. **In an area as rapidly changing as IT, that means that our number one requirement is to recruit and hire the absolutely best IT talent possible.** And, we need to be as flexible and quick-acting as possible in the way that we go about doing that.

We are an R-1, land-grant university that has a special role in the area of IT innovation. The Urbana campus was the birthplace of PLATO, the world's first web browser, home to NCSA, and the current home of Blue Waters, one of the world's fastest supercomputers, capable of sustained performance of 1 petaflop on a range of real-world science and engineering applications. Our campus is currently engaged in a number of innovative IT activities such as our recent federally funded UC2B community broadband project and our campus-wide adoption of Microsoft's Unified Communications infrastructure. To succeed in these efforts, we have to hire the very best talent possible and our competitors are places like Stanford, MIT, Silicon Valley giants like Google and Apple, as well as Redmond giants like Microsoft. Our competitors are aggressive and well-funded. That puts us in a different category perhaps than an average state supported university. And, while some of our IT positions can legitimately be filled as Civil Service positions, others require the flexibility and academic focus that the AP position lends itself to.

When our researchers successfully land a new research grant in an area requiring advanced computing support, the ability of the institution to create the right sort of job description for an academic professional IT position and get that filled with the absolutely best person for the job is

mission critical. Currently, the HR officers in our Colleges and major research units know how to write a detailed job description that can attract the very best applicants from a national talent pool. When those job descriptions are written, they are then submitted to the campus's Office of Academic Human Resources and Office of Staff Human Resources for a prompt, but rigorous evaluation. If the officials in the campus HR Offices believe that the position being described in the draft Principal Academic Professional Exemption (PAPE) form would be more properly be filled as a Civil Service position, then they let the petitioning department know that quickly; and if questions of clarification need to be made, they are well positioned to do that as well. This raises a couple of important points that I would ask the SUCSS board to give serious consideration to:

1. It is critically important for the reviewing group (currently campus Academic HR) to have as complete an understanding of the needs of the requesting unit as possible. For example, having some prior knowledge of what is involved in running a project like Unified Communications helps the Academic HR officials better evaluate the PAPE forms that CITES (Campus Information Technologies and Educational Services) submits for positions in that area. Close physical proximity (being on the same campus) facilitates that sort of essential background understanding and should be a key requirement in whatever system is used for PAPE evaluations.
2. The current campus Office of Academic Human Resources is staffed at an appropriate level so that it can respond **quickly** to a PAPE review from an academic department. The SUCSS system is not. This means that if the proposed change were to be adopted, the academic units could expect longer delays in processing their requests.

I should also mention that I fully understand and support the need for all three types of personnel appointments that we use on our campus – civil service, academic professional, and tenure-track faculty positions. All three are important, and all three have their proper place in performing the important work of this campus. Please understand that I say that because at one point in my long career at the University of Illinois, I have actually held each of these three types of appointments myself. I began my career here as a civil service employee, worked for a few years in a tenure-track line (before that category of service was later re-classified to AP), and then have served the balance of my career as an Academic Professional. So, I know and value all three types of appointments. And, out of that personal experience, I have come to understand why it so important to have a job properly designated as to what type of position it is.

If a position legitimately merits being designated as academic professional, then if it were to be mistakenly classified as a civil service position, such a ruling would do the hiring department a major disservice. **And, I contend that the likelihood of some sort of mis-classification happening increases the greater the distance between the petitioner and the reviewer of that petition.** Let's look at what sort of harm such a mis-classification could produce:

1. As stated earlier, my major over-riding requirement is to recruit and hire only the best of the best for our academic professional IT positions. With an AP position, search committees can advertise nationally and attract highly qualified applicants through targeted advertising that describes the nature of that particular job. Those same options do not exist with the civil service hiring process, which adopts a more generic, one-size-fits-all description of what that "role" performs.

2. In an AP search, the search committee gets a chance to review **all of the applications** to determine the best fit. That stands in marked contrast to the Civil Service procedures, where the “rule of three” means that the employing department only gets to see three applicants at a time, with the pre-screening being done by an external entity, based not on an interview, but on a standardized test. I have served on many search committees over my career where the best candidate would not have necessarily surfaced through a civil service type rating system, but was able to be identified by the search committee as a promising applicant – and, in the end, became an outstanding employee within their unit.
3. Finally, if the position were to be mistakenly filled as a civil service position instead of as an AP position, then the possibility of “bumping rights” would enter the picture. This is problematic because the concept of “bumping rights” carries with it the inherent concept that two employees in the same civil service classification are functionally identical in terms of job skills and that the only major differentiator is years of experience. That simply is not true in most academic professional IT positions.

In conclusion, the ability to attract and hire the very best IT professionals is essential for this campus to fully realize its academic mission, and I believe that removing the Exemption authority from this campus and transferring it to SUCSS would cause major, irreparable harm to the institution. I say this based on over forty years experience serving this great university.

I regret that previously scheduled commitments will prevent me from presenting my comments in person at the official hearing on January 3, but I would respectfully ask that you share this letter with the members of the SUCSS board and add this letter to the official record of the proceedings.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these points for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Paul Hixson
Interim CIO

c: I. Adesida
E. Cole
R. Easter
P. Wise