

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA - CHAMPAIGN

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State Universities Civil Service System (SUCSS) Merit Board
c/o Mr. Lewis T. (Tom) Morelock, Executive Director
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Mr. Morelock and Members of the SUCSS Merit Board:

My name is Melissa Madsen and I am an academic professional at the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Later this month, I will assume the position of assistant director of Human Resources for the College of Fine and Applied Arts. I am an elected representative of one of the 11 districts of the Council of Academic Professionals (otherwise known as CAP) and also serve as its Communications Officer.

Although I am speaking for myself, I give you this background merely for context. Others have and will be speaking about the issues with more eloquence and detail than I can offer about the rigidity, timeliness, and other issues posed by the proposed amendment.

Decisions about whether a position should be academic professional or not are best left to the campus, the hiring department, and the HR professionals advising those entities. Period. One small state agency cannot hope to understand the diverse needs of the state's universities. I wager that those of you on the Merit Board who run your own businesses would not subject yourself to the aging and increasingly irrelevant rules in this system, whether that's bumping, the rule of three, hiring only current Illinois residents, or considering only those who've passed a standardized test of questionable relevance.

There is already an audit process in place. Unfortunately, that audit process has been subverted from its original purpose, which is to identify shortcomings in classification decisions and opportunities for systemic improvement. Rather, audits are crafted now to support a foregone conclusion: That somehow the state's universities have suddenly stopped playing by the rules.

So now, SUCSS can point to the Urbana campus's 2011 audit and how it compares so unfavorably with the 2009 audit. What goes unsaid is that the goalposts were moved. Previous audits selected people at random; in 2011 the audits were "targeted random" — a concept akin to being "half-pregnant." Sample sizes were increased dramatically to further exaggerate the *number* of violations relative to previous audits.

In addition, no satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming from SUCSS officials for the disconnect between their original post-audit statements to University personnel, in which they made representations that the audit would be positive, to the strongly negative results in the final report.

A look at the 2011 audit findings reveals the shortcomings in this new means of measuring compliance. It is readily apparent from looking at the findings that certain classifications, fields, and salary ranges were targeted. The flaws of this approach resulted in my CAP district having 227% higher audit findings than what should be expected. In 2 years did my district's HR professionals suddenly become less qualified than those elsewhere on campus? In two years, did our HR professionals and units suddenly throw out the rulebook, in the face of the increased scrutiny and politicization of this issue? Certainly not: However, the arts and the other fields in my district do pay lower, the titles tend to be of lower rank because of structural factors, and the type of positions targeted are heavily represented in my district.

The separation of powers between the audit function and the decision to exempt positions should be preserved. To do otherwise is to invite a lack of transparency, delays, decisions made with no right of appeal, and mistakes made without any ability to correct them. And yes, auditors do make mistakes. In the 2009 audit, the position of one of the employees in my former unit was proposed to be reclassified to no less than 3 divergent classifications: TWO of these were based on responsibilities she didn't have. How do you audit a position and come up with recommendations based on work done by others? Without exemption authority, how would a university have the ability to address these mistakes?

The answers to those questions aren't forthcoming. Instead, the debate devolves to sensationalism. In the media, we have seen at least one SUCSS official accuse academic professionals of getting their jobs through nepotism and incorrectly imply that the civil service system prevents such abuses. Repeatedly the false argument is made that academic professionals are responsible for declines in some civil service classifications that are more properly attributed to Microsoft Office, computerized phone systems, and the Internet. As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, "You are entitled to your own opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts."

During my lifetime half of this state's governors have gone to jail. What disturbs me most about these attempts both legislatively and administratively to remove the exemption authority is what everyone seems to recognize but no one will verbalize: The attacks on the exemption authority are being pushed, not because of best practices that will allow this state to compete effectively with institutions in rival states, but because of classic Illinois politics.

Our state's higher education system is already handicapped by a pension system in crisis and a budget hopelessly imbalanced. Academic professionals who contact me are frustrated at the lack of transparency and politics that's being played, whether that's backroom deals in the Legislature or behind the scenes lobbying elsewhere. I urge members of the Merit Board, as part of your fiduciary duty to your institutions and the people of the state of Illinois, to do your utmost to preserve the exemption authority.