

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN SENATE
Senate Executive Committee
(Final; Action)

SC.13.08 SEC Statement on the Potential Loss of Exemption Authority

BACKGROUND

In April 2011, the Academic Senate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign endorsed a statement by the Council of Academic Professionals against the removal of the Exemption Authority. The Exemption Authority allows the campus to decide which positions should be exempted from civil service, giving it the authority to determine whether a position is classified as civil service or academic professional. At the time there were concerns among Academic Professionals about a trend in reclassifying positions from academic professional to civil service stemming from the audit findings at another campus of the University of Illinois system as well as the perceived risk of the State Universities Civil Service System (SUCSS) acting to remove the exemption authority from state universities. The audit process, conducted by the State Universities Civil Service System, is designed to hold state universities accountable and to ensure compliance with the rules and procedures of the Merit Board, which is the governing body of SUCSS. The process of selecting which positions are to be audited and the selection standards are determined by SUCSS. Human resources professionals at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign work diligently to address the findings of audits and have a tradition of doing so effectively for a number of years.

The Senate, in endorsing this statement, reinforced concerns that losing flexibility in hiring academic professionals would severely inhibit the teaching, research, and service functions of the university. Increasingly, the ability to create and fill positions customized to emerging needs is a crucial part of the university's agility and ability to respond to opportunities as they present themselves, and to reallocate human resources as campus priorities change.

PROBLEM

The risk of the loss of the exemption authority is even more serious today. The SUCSS Merit Board is considering an amendment to the State Universities Civil Service System 80 Illinois Administrative Code 250.30 that would remove exemption authority from state universities under its purview and give that authority instead to SUCSS.

STATEMENT OF POSITION

We oppose the removal of position exemption authority from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We believe that such a development would harm the institution by requiring that a third party assume responsibility for determining which positions are exempt. Making these determinations within the university's decision-making process is essential to the mission-critical functions of the University, and, for that matter, for all of the public universities in the State of Illinois.

In the Spring of 2012 the academic professional advisory bodies at the three campuses that comprise the University of Illinois system - Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield – solicited the opinions of faculty and staff regarding the aforementioned amendment that would remove the exemption authority. 584 comments were submitted as part of this process and more than 500 of these comments were against the removal of the exemption authority. The crux of the comments is that we need to keep hiring decisions as close to the local level as possible to ensure that we recruit talent of the highest caliber in an efficient and effective manner.

RISKS

Determining which positions are exempt is an essential part of the hiring process at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a tier-one research institution. We want to emphasize the critical role that Academic Professionals play in achieving the University's research, teaching and service missions.

The removal of the exemption authority jeopardizes the University's ability to recruit and retain the most talented staff members. In this critical time for higher education, we must maintain the University's ability to determine which people to hire to maximize its potential. Key decisions such as which positions to exempt should not be determined by a centralized agency but by the skilled, experienced human resources professionals who work at the University, who know its needs best, and who have been making such judgments successfully and equitably for years.

SOLUTION

We believe that the SUCSS audit process is sufficient to hold the University accountable. The way to move forward is not by removing the exemption authority. We have full confidence in the human resources professionals working at the University to improve processes in ways that address audit findings.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to retain its ability to exempt positions. While we value all staff members and respect the substantial contributions of all job classifications, we recognize the flexibility associated with Academic Professional classifications that together with the other job classifications allow our University to excel in achieving its public missions.

In an era when Universities need to be agile in their hiring and retention strategies, when competition for talented staff members is globalized, we need to ensure that talent management including the authority to exempt positions remains autonomous. When this authority is placed in the hands of a centralized agency, that autonomy is lost and puts at risk our status as a world-class research University.

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